

LAND TO THE TILLER

an interview with **Zegeye Asfaw**

Ann Oosthuizen

Foreword by Tesfaye Habisso Haydebo



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In 1974, one of the most extensive land reform programmes in history returned the land from the Ethiopian aristocracy to the people who tilled it. Overseeing this land reform was an inspiring but humble figure, Zegeye Asfaw, Oromo and Ethiopian.

Retaining the conversational style of the original 2012 interviews, Zegeye tells the story of his life, of the struggle for land reform, and of the personal cost of that struggle for himself and others. Despite a 10 year imprisonment, Zegeye is able to give an independent assessment of the man who jailed him, Mengistu Haile Mariam. The book includes a discussion, also from 2012, in which three people from the following generation talk about their experience of working with Zegeye.

For those who are interested in land reform – either in Ethiopia or beyond – the book provides a unique view of that period. The interview informs our understanding of current issues. and provides a very accessible introduction to recent Ethiopian history.

The interview has not been updated to reflect the significant changes, since the 2012 interview, in Ethiopia and in the lives of individuals.

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Ann Oosthuizen

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Foreword

The interview in this book is essential for understanding Ethiopia and its history. It tackles the tensions between the North and South of Ethiopia; it throws light on the student movements that shaped the politics of the last fifty years; and it provides insights from inside the governments of three very different regimes. Most of all, it is a story of the land itself.

Zegeye Asfaw Abdi became an historic and towering figure, famous throughout the country. What we have all admired about him over the years is his modesty and simplicity; his networking ability; his participatory and inclusive work ethic; and his capability to transcend ethnic, religious, political and social differences to treat all in fairness and justice. He was, and remains, passionate about the importance of land for ordinary women and men, because the 'land question' in Ethiopia is about being a full citizen. He has a tenacity to stand up for the cause – not as a sloganeering revolutionary, but as a strategic thinker and networker who built the foundation for collective action at every opportunity – even within the dungeons of the Derg. He never lost hope, but carried on navigating obstacles and practising the 'art of the possible'.

The older generation is often blamed by the younger generation for the problems of Ethiopia today. But this is a story of how people from this older generation sought to address deep historical injustice. They were the pathfinders of their day. The title of this book is a leftist slogan well known the world over. But as students, we never knew precisely what 'Land to the Tiller' meant. Was it

government ownership? We worked it through ourselves so that Ethiopia's land reform, when it came, was not a text-book land reform. This interview with Zegeye Asfaw helps us to understand the history of land in Ethiopia and why it matters more than ever.

For most Ethiopians, land remains a vital source of identity and power. The majority of Ethiopians will continue to live in rural areas for the next fifty years at least. Who will care for the land and all its vital resources, if we do not also have a vision for rural Ethiopia that builds on rather than undermines that close relationship between people and land? This is a task for the new pathfinders.

My knowledge of Zegeye stretches back to our university days in the 1970s. We were not only contemporaries but also shared, more or less, many common elements or features. Zegeye was born in 1942 to a respected landowning family in Western Oromia. I was born in 1947 to a landowning family and boasted of being a member of the ruling clan of Kembata – in fact a great-great grandson of 'Woma' (King Dilbato Degoye Waqo), the last king of the Kembata nation, who was killed in 1893 by the generals of King Menelik of Shoa. Both of us lived at a historical time in the long and chequered history of Ethiopia. When we were both high school students – Zegeye in Addis Ababa and myself in Adama/Nazareth – the famous Neway brothers (General Mengistu Neway of the Imperial Bodyguard and Gername Neway, Governor of Ogaden) staged a failed coup in 1960 against Haile Selassie's imperial regime. Both of us joined the Faculty of Science, University College of Addis Ababa, almost at the same time: Zegeye in 1963, and myself in 1965. Both of us resigned from the Faculty of Science after one year of study, and re-registered at the Faculty of Arts and Business Administration, due to our poor grades in Physics. Zegeye Asfaw subsequently joined the Faculty of Law and I continued in the College of Business Administration. We used to find ourselves involved in different student meetings and demonstrations, proclaiming especially the slogan of Land to the Tiller as well as on numerous other national, continental and global issues of the day such as Labour Unions demands, Teachers'

Association demands; urban migration of peasants from Wollo to Addis Ababa; Ian Smith's Unilateral Declaration of Independence in Rhodesia; the Viet Nam War; Apartheid in South Africa; and other key events.

Zegeye graduated from the Faculty of Law in 1969 and joined the Ministry of Land Reform; I graduated from the College of Business Administration and was employed at the Road Transport Administration, Ministry of Transport and Communications. As many of my colleagues at the Road Transport Administration were former radical students and mutual friends of us both, we occasionally met at the offices of Zegeye and his close colleagues to discuss land reform and socialism in Ethiopia.

Zegeye Asfaw Abdi's name became popular in Addis Ababa, especially among the university community, after he and his close friend Abebe Worqe filed Habeas Corpus at the High Court on behalf of seven university students (including Birhane Mesqel Reda, Gebru Mersha, Wallelign Mekonnen, Zeru Kishen, and Mesfin Kassu). They had been detained by government authorities because of their leading role in student demonstrations in 1968/69. His strong stance in standing up and challenging the unjust system at the court of law – even while he was just a law student – heralded the direction of his future career and his passion to uphold the cause of peasants and to challenge the feudal order.

Zegeye was granted a fellowship at the University of Wisconsin, USA, and completed his MSc degree in Legal Institutions. Despite being offered the chance to stay on for a PhD, he chose to return to Ethiopia to pursue the burning question of land tenure reforms in the interest of the oppressed tenants and serfs of the feudal landlords. After several futile attempts had been made by government to introduce land tenure reforms, a golden opportunity arose for Zegeye and his reform-seeking colleagues and friends to push Land to The Tiller to fruition.

The eruption of a popular revolution in 1974 toppled the Emperor and created the space for Zegeye and his team to draft a radical

proclamation in favour of Land to the Tiller. They succeeded in getting it approved and subsequently issued by the Provisional Military Administrative Council [PMAC] in 1975. This was an historical event in the long and turbulent history of modern-day Ethiopia, and a bonanza for the Ministry of Land Reform and for the PMAC itself, as these two institutions suddenly reaped an incredible popularity among university students, the peasant masses, and the broad progressive forces throughout the country. It was the key substantive achievement of the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution which still lingers in the minds of many people: nothing of that sort of 'Manna from Heaven' has ever rained down on the people of Ethiopia since. Thanks to Zegeye, 'Land to the Tiller' ceased to hang as a mere slogan on the student council boards, as more than 60,000 university students and their professors were deployed to implement the proclamation. Though there were several cases of stiff resistance by the former feudal landlords as well as the loss of several lives during the struggle to implement the revolutionary land proclamation, rural and urban lands were turn-by-turn brought under public ownership, and the era of landlord-tenant bond was brought to an end once for all.

Sadly, Zegeye – this historic figure and tenacious, life-long defender of the rights of peasants and all oppressed sections of our population – became a victim of blind justice. The military government decided to banish him and several of his close associates to its notorious torture chamber, the infamous Maekelawi prison in Addis Ababa. He and his friends languished there for about 10 years with no justifiable case.

Zegeye and most of his friends were released with the downfall of the junta in 1991. We again met at the so-called July Peace and Democracy Conference convened by the EPRDF and OLF victors over the Derg in July 1991 at the ECA Hall. Zegeye was one of the 12 members representing the OLF in the Transitional Conference and government; he was one of the key individuals along with others to draft the Transitional Period Charter of 1992, which incorporated

the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) in its provisions. The Charter was endorsed and promulgated by the Transitional Council of Representatives. I was elected Secretary of the Council and Zegeye was appointed Minister of Agriculture in the Transitional Government of Ethiopia [TGE].

The OLF and the EPRDF, main stakeholders of the Transitional Charter, soon became strained bed-fellows and quarreled over the conduct of the 1992 regional elections. The OLF withdrew from the TGE, prompting the EPRDF to banish them swiftly, not only from the TGE but from the country itself. They were told, as some of their leaders confided to me later, to save their skins and flee the country. Zegeye had no option but to join the exodus with his comrades, living in UK and USA for nearly a year. But forced exile from his homeland was unbearable for him. He used his considerable networking and diplomatic acumen to secure the required approval and permission from appropriate officials of the incumbent government and returned to his country in 1993. Soon after, he was able to kick-start a small NGO by the name Hundee where he still works as its Director. May God bless him and his brain-child, Hundee!

Tesfaye Habisso Haydebo

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It is September 2012. We meet over two weeks in the Lime Tree Café in Addis Ababa. It is a large airy room on the second floor of a modern building. Zegeye is ready to tell his story. Many people have asked that he tell it. On the tape recorder you can hear his quiet voice above the noise of the coffee machine and the music of the café.

1942–1969

Family and Education

My name is Zegeye Asfaw. I'm from the Oromo ethnic group, the largest ethnic group in Ethiopia, at present forty million strong. I'm over seventy years old now. I was born on April 13th, 1942 to a land-owning family. I was born in a small village called Bukusami, in Wolmera, West Oromia. My mother gave birth to sixteen children and I am the twelfth child. I think she must have been what they now call Rhesus Negative. At that time it wasn't diagnosed and she lost many of her babies as they were born. We are four children still surviving now¹, one elder sister and two younger brothers, but I had another older brother and two older sisters, whom I have lost in the last twenty to thirty years. I was especially close to those two sisters, who were much older than me, Wibitu Asfaw and Askale Asfaw. They grew up and had families of their own. We were always an extremely close family.

As a peasant family, my father owned sufficient land to support all of us. He also had a number of tenants. These were sharecroppers, who used to farm part of the land. This was hard for them. These small tenants were bound to give a portion of their produce every year to the landlord. At that time tenants were not only obliged to give crops, but they were also expected to provide free personal services to the landlord.

My mother and father were descended from two well-known,

¹ At the time of the interview in 2012

but very different Oromo clans. My great grandfather on my father's side joined Menelik's invading army and participated in the conquest of Oromia as a *Fit'awrari*, an agent of Menelik's imperialism (1889–1913). My father was Asfaw Abdi Biru Negawo. My great grandfather on my mother's side was a liberation fighter who tried to organise Oromo around this area to withstand the onslaught of Emperor Menelik. My mother was Mulu Dadi Tufa



My sister, Wubitu Asfaw



My sister, Askale Asfaw



My Parents, Asfaw Abdi Biru and Mulu Dadi Tufa Muna

Muna. So both sides in the history of Oromia are represented in my family. One great grandfather, who participated in the conquest of Oromia, was a loyal servant of Emperor Menelik, the other great grandfather was a liberation fighter, who tried to organise the Oromo in this area against the invasion from the north.

Because of his family connections, my father had the opportunity to receive some education at the first school to be opened in Ethiopia, Menelik School, and made some friends there. When he left school, he went back to this same area where I was born. He married my mother and started a life of his own.

My father was recruited to fight against the second Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1936. When he came back he didn't look for any government job. He was well-educated in Amharic, but he decided to go back to the land and live an independent life. During the Italian invasion, the different fighters went underground and waged a guerrilla war. He used to support these guerrilla fighters. He was a self-educated carpenter, and he also made clothes, so he used to provide ready-made clothes for these fighters. He stayed on the farm, looking after his family, until he died.

We were self-sufficient as a family. We had everything we needed. Maybe my father would buy khaki clothes for us boys, but otherwise my mother was a fantastic weaver. We had sheep and goats. Even I had a lot of goats and sheep in my name! My father could afford to hire a priest, living with us in that village, to be a tutor to us children. All my elder brothers and sisters had to go through this Christian school. They learned to write and read some religious books, like *The Chronicles of Gabriel* and so on. I also had the opportunity of attending this school, and, when I was about eleven years' old, I finished what *Yeneta* Tessema from Bulga could teach us: reading and writing and even reciting some of these books. (I don't remember much of them now!)

And then a time came when I would spend all day literally doing nothing except riding horses and socialising with boys of my age. My father had given me all the education he could, and in some

ways he was really pushing me to join a religious order and ascend a religious hierarchy. At that time young students from Yeneta schools would go to Addis to get a sort of blessing from the Ethiopian Patriarch (who came from Egypt). This was the first step to joining the church in the position of a deacon. So I had that opportunity and my father was really hoping I would go in that direction.

My father's sister, Tenagnework Abdi, was living in Addis Ababa. She had a brilliant young son, Shibru Seifu, who was going to the Haile Selassie elementary school near where they were living. He happened to visit us in Kobo/Bukusami and he discussed with my father and almost convinced him that he would take responsibility for my education in Addis Ababa. My mother was not really comfortable with the idea of losing me, maybe because of having already lost so many children. She was saying, 'No, he can't leave us!' But finally my cousin convinced my parents that I should go to school in Addis Ababa. I was only twelve, but I was so eager to leave that peasant life and join modern education as it was called at that time.

I still remember that first day at school. I didn't know anything about Addis Ababa. I couldn't find my way to the school. My cousin, Shibru, had a land dispute with another fellow and his court day was the same day that the school was opening. He just told me that there was a young boy called Sanni—he described his clothes—who always passed our house on his way to school. He said, 'Just follow him. He goes directly to the school.' So I followed Sanni. At that time there was no registration. We just lined up and without knowing what I was doing, I landed up in class 1C. I followed Sanni to all the right places. That's how I started at school!

On the second day, everything was normal. My cousin was in the fifth grade at that time. The fifth graders were really extremely mature. He vowed to himself that he could make me master the English alphabet, read some English books and also be fluent and good at dictation within three months. He had his own siblings, but he didn't want to burden them with this small responsibility.

So he really did it! In three months, I was starting to read short sentences and had managed spelling and dictation.

In those days the school year was divided into three semesters. The first semester ended around Christmas. During every holiday break, my father would send somebody to bring me back to the countryside. I was going back every holiday right until I started my second year at university. I was always going home, which is why I still call myself a rural person because all those years I had the opportunity to talk, to be, to see, to observe what the other boys were doing.

I studied hard. The biggest fight that Shibru had with me—although he was still a boy, he was much bigger than me and he used to beat me—the problem was not being able to differentiate between a ‘b’ and a ‘d’ when he was teaching me the alphabet. My grandson now, who is eight, has a similar problem. Sometimes my aunt, *Abaye* Tenagne, would tell Shibru that she worried that I might feel disadvantaged because of Shibru’s rigorous discipline,



Grade 10C students, Haile Selassie I Elementary & Secondary School. Zegeye is at the top right hand side.

but every year my aunt was comparing my grades with those of her sons and daughters and I always happened to get the top marks!

All the classes were given in Amharic, except for one class in English. I am an Oromo and had a heavy Oromo accent. The Amhara kids used to call me names, like '*galla*', or 'country boy', or 'some wild thing'. It was derogatory. I didn't speak in class because they all laughed at my Oromo accent. I was the quietest boy in class! I think I kept quiet like this up until the time I joined the law school, when I had to change—because as a law student you have to argue, you can't just suck in knowledge.

I attended this school for ten years. I was a serious student because Shibru was also an outstanding student in his class. I had a role model. I just wanted to become what Shibru had become.

There was a new military academy that the Emperor had established in Harar. The best students were normally recruited to go into the military academy, but I had won a scholarship to go to a medical school in Yugoslavia. I had passed London Schools Matriculation and also the Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate. I had both certificates in my hand. The trouble was that if I registered at the university, the military would come for me. I really didn't want that life. My father had rejected it, and my mother had too. My eldest brother had been recruited to be temporarily in the army, but my mother raised hell—and she could convince her son to stay with her! So that history was also part of my decision. So I decided to spend another year out of education instead of going to the military academy. I never liked the idea of following the military life because it wasn't a tradition in my family.

My ultimate intention was to become a medical doctor. I started processing the scholarship that I had won. The university in Yugoslavia accepted me and offered me everything I needed. I had a passport and a visa, but on the day before I was due to leave, someone phoned me from the Ministry of Health and told me to come for an interview. I did well in the interview except for one question.

He said, 'Have you taken pure Chemistry?' In those days we did General Science at school, not pure Chemistry. He said, 'How can you enrol for Medicine without pure Chemistry?' I replied, 'If the university has accepted me, it's not up to you to decide.' But he cancelled my opportunity then and there. That was the day I really wept and said goodbye to Science.

However, to escape from the military, I went to the Science Faculty here in Addis Ababa and showed Dean Macfarlane my London Matriculation grades and my Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate. They accepted me without registration, so in this way I evaded the Military Academy. I spent one year in the Science Faculty, but to be honest I couldn't understand Physics, which I hadn't taken at school. I had good grades in Calculus, Biology and Chemistry, but this American professor who was teaching us Physics literally tormented me! Other boys coming from other high schools had taken Physics, but I had been a General Science student. He used to draw a stick figure, and wrote Rest in Peace, RIP, on my paper. That was so damning.

This made me move to the Arts Faculty and I thoroughly enjoyed my time there. I was recruited to activism there, and started to become a student activist. For instance, the people marching from Wollo over the land issue were prevented from reaching Addis Ababa. It was a peaceful demonstration; but they were mistreated. This radicalised the students and we joined their ranks to emphasise our concern. I know that I am coming from a land-owning family, but all the same it wasn't right to save my family from criticism for what landlords were doing as a class.

Some of our tenants were people who fought with my father during the Italian occupation. We considered them to be relatives and they would come to assist us if they were needed. But when it comes to the situation of the peasants in general, they had to pay one quarter or one third of what they produced annually to the landlord. Also tenants' wives had to provide services and go to work in the household of the landlord, and even the husband

and the children were expected to give free labour. They could be evicted at any time. They were literally slaves.

I remember the time when I started fomenting some problems within the area where I was born. When the government passed an income tax on agriculture, the landlords started to force the tenants to pay this tax. I told the people, 'This is supposed to be paid by the landlords themselves, not by you!' Some landowners even came to complain to my father asking him to advise me to stop agitating. What was important to me was that my contact with the rural setting gave me a deep sense of identification with these people. Those are my roots. They are the people who really brought me up! You can't imagine what a mother with sixteen children would do without their support. So I really became active in land politics and began to think about the programme of Land to the Tiller.

The students of that time were really starting to become activists. The first thing that we did was to stage demonstrations. We were the pampered children of the Emperor: we had our dormitories, we had people who made our beds, and we used to eat very well. The issue the students picked was that the shower had no shower curtain! That was the issue we picked, but we also started slowly taking up issues of social justice. So whenever we were due to write exams, we created an issue for a demonstration. Sometimes it was really just to postpone the day of judgement!

The Dean of Arts was Professor Jabetz from Hebrew University. He decided to upgrade the entire curriculum. He used to say that when you finished your fourth year at Addis Ababa University, you could go directly to London University and be accepted for a Masters. The first year was a tough year for me, but I managed to pass. The Dean was telling us that the first-year students were his enemies because this was the time when he had to 'kill' all those who didn't have the proper motivation.

When I joined the second year, I got interested in finding out how politics around Africa works. About twelve of us from second year Economics were not satisfied with the Student Council. We

elected a Student Council every year so that they could interface with the university administration in order to make them respond to student demands. We decided we needed to stage a coup against our student representatives. We wanted to write a manifesto, but we couldn't agree on a name for our group. We had no literature to consult on how the other revolutions worked in Eastern Europe. Somebody suggested that the new name should be 'The Revisionist Party of Addis Ababa'! Our manifesto went under that name.

We distributed that paper in all the dormitories within the compound of the university, but took care that it didn't reach outside the university. In the morning, everyone read the paper—a fifteen-page manifesto. Some teachers were grumbling that this was an infiltration of this and that, although our English teacher complimented whoever had written the manifesto (the identity of the group remained secret). A meeting was called for the afternoon and about five or six hundred students turned up. We succeeded in replacing the student representatives with others, and this was how some of these radical ideas started to gain ground within the university.

Sending police and members of the imperial bodyguard all over campus to suppress the student demonstrations was the practice of the day, but gradually we managed to convince some of the members of the police and the bodyguards that what we were doing was not for our own sake, but to bring about change in society. We were in great danger really because this happened a few years after the failed coup of General Mengistu Neway and Gername Neway (1960), who wanted radical reform of the political system. My cousin Shibru was a student in the Department of Political Science at that time, and he had to run away with Professor Greenfield, a British historian who wrote a lot about the uprisings, because he was implicated in the coup. They went to the Kenya border until the executions subsided.

After being enrolled in the Arts Faculty for two years, I moved to the Law School. Why? I still don't know why I did, up to this day.

I think in all grades you have people that you compete with, but all my colleagues seemed to have migrated to the Law School. I met Bekele Wolde who said, 'Are you still in the same place? Where are you going? I am already registered at the Law School and it's a shame that you are still here.' I thought for a while, and then replied, 'If you guys are going, I will apply to come there too.' It is true that in those days lawyers were really regarded as having a high prestige.

I was accepted at the Law School and all the revolutionary fervour that used to be around us when I was in the Arts Faculty started to wane. We started talking about the rule of law, and how social engineering can be brought about by changing the laws, and how laws could be regarded as the centre of the action. The other students called us the 'Centre of Reactionaries' because we had started talking about laws and changing laws.

We had a very big demonstration in which literally everybody took part. Seven of our colleagues from different faculties were arrested. Speaking as lawyers, we said, 'Why don't we file *Habeas Corpus*, to have our friends released?' *Habeas Corpus* means you can't hold prisoners without bringing them to court. So Abebe Worke and I filed *Habeas Corpus* at the High Court,



Law School, mock trial, 1966. Also in the photo is Abebe, who became a prominent defence lawyer.

and a summons was issued to the Attorney General to bring the prisoners to court the next day. The next day all of us including our professors were there to witness the very first case of *Habeas Corpus* in Ethiopia. Our friends appeared with a policeman, not the Attorney General. Before he started the proceedings, the Judge read our plea and asked whether we were licensed as attorneys to argue the case. We said, 'We are students!' He said, 'I won't allow students to argue in my court!' Two brilliant lawyers were in the court. We asked one, 'Could you help us? There's nothing you need to do. All you have to do is read what we have prepared.' He said, 'I'm not going to get involved.' The second lawyer, *Ato* Getahun Hunegnaw from Addis Ababa, agreed. He took up the case.

The Judge asked why there was no charge, but the police replied that they needed time to complete their investigation. The Judge, Justice Negussie Fitehaweke, said that the constitution wouldn't accept indefinite imprisonment, and that the Attorney General should have brought the detainees before a court within 48 hours. In addition, the police told the court that because of the demonstrations, the police were spread city-wide and they didn't have anybody to charge these prisoners. But the judge said that the court couldn't accept this argument. He decided they should be released immediately. So we all marched back to the university and we demonstrated to those who called us 'Centre of Reactionaries' that we could also use the laws to change things.

This was a very important experience for me and also for Abebe Worke, who became a prominent lawyer and who defended many political prisoners in Ethiopia, even during the Derg regime. That day must have been an inspiration for him. It was a milestone for us both.

I graduated in 1969 with a Bachelor of Law degree. In those days you had six or seven places to choose from, not like now when you are advised to join up with others to form group practices. I was advised by my professor not to join the Ministry of Justice but rather to join the Ministry of Land Reform because of my interest

in peasant issues. However, before being recruited as an employee, when we had finished all our exams and submitted all our papers, we still had to serve one year of university service as part of our degree requirement. I served one year in the Ministry of Land Reform as a field tenure expert in many provinces including Tigray. Working in Tigray was a new environment for me, but I had a lot of Tigray friends at the Law School, so it wasn't a problem for me.

These friends used to boast to me that they didn't have a feudal land-holding system in Tigray. They claimed that the land was communal—that anybody could go and claim land. I found this to be untrue. There was a form of tenancy arrangement in Tigray where even the churches were big landowners and many of the farmers were tilling the land on a tenancy arrangement. Farmers were in the same bondage as the peasant farmers in the south. The farmers grumbled that although they paid taxes for the land, and had to



At the University of Wisconsin

discharge government functions, and although their ownership went back to what they called the pioneer fathers, they did not own the land. There were even examples where tenants fought their cases in the courts. So when the system was abolished, it was replaced with a Land to the Tiller programme.

After my year of university service, I

came back to the Ministry of Land Reform as a junior legal expert. But my professor at the university had managed to get me a scholarship to the University of Wisconsin, which had a large and rich collection of literature on land reform and peasant revolt in Latin America.

I did my Master of Science in legal institutions there. My teachers wanted me to stay longer and do a PhD, but I said I'd already started something in Ethiopia and I couldn't stay longer. So I returned and joined the Ministry of Land Reform as a regular employee.

1970–1974

The Emperor's Ministry of Land Reform

At that time land reform was very high on the government agenda. Every five-year plan used to talk about it. At this time the Swedes had a development unit in Arsi, the Chilalo Development Unit. It was a very big presence there. They discovered that unless tenancy was regulated, all the investment that they were making in terms of technological improvement for the farmers would not really benefit them. The Swedes had concrete experience which made them push for reform. Also Mr McNamara of the World Bank was suggesting reform. The Emperor had to set up something fake. So the Ministry of Land Reform was set up, but there was no reform to be implemented; only the Ministry was there. So we did a lot of drafting of legislation. One was on the landlord–tenant relationship, in which tenancy was to be regulated, where sharecropping would be amended, where the owners of the land couldn't really chase out the peasants. This was one piece of legislation we were working on. Another was land registration and land survey and also the setting of upper limits to land holdings, because when you talk about landlords you are thinking of thousands and thousands of hectares of land under their ownership. Another law we were working on was progressive land taxation.

These laws took us really a lot of time to prepare, even with the assistance of some foreigners. I was a young lawyer in the Department of Tenancy Relationships. The World Bank was suggesting



Land Reform Research Team. Zegeye is second from the right.

to the Ethiopian Government that it was time we introduced some sort of land reform. We had to develop four or five programmes. The only programme that succeeded in passing a close examination by the Council of Ministers was the landlord-tenant relationship programme—from my department.

When we submitted this legislation to parliament we had zero support, no support whatsoever. Some people thought that this legislation was tantamount to proclaiming a new version of 'slavery' for tenant farmers. Others were saying that we would destroy the amicable relationship between tenants and landlords. My Minister at that time was Belay Abay. He was a graduate of the London School of Economics and had also studied at Harvard University. He was a very patient person. He really tried to understand all the different forces that were working against us. He designed a scheme where we had to lobby and explain the falsity of the arguments against the tenancy law. He literally spoke to all the Deputies in the Parliament. It was then that I started to get ideas about how to go about

networking. We sat in his office with a few of our colleagues and he really drove us forward.

The biggest obstacle, as we perceived then, was Princess Tenagnework, daughter of the Emperor. Instead of approaching her head-on, *Ato* Belay tried to work through her former boyfriend in London, but unfortunately he wasn't successful. Then he started to identify close friends of *Ato* Abebe Reta and there Belay Abay really did a marvellous job. Some young 'turks' in the department were impatient, and started using fiery words; but Belay was the engineer who saw the bill through. So from zero support, we managed to get 84% support for the tenancy law in the House of Deputies. We also had excellent contacts in the countryside and organised the peasants to come to Addis Ababa to listen from the gallery of the House of Deputies to see for themselves how their representatives were arguing for and against them.

On the last day the Speaker was instructed to stop the voting. *Ato* Belay was summoned to the palace. As *Ato* Belay later informed the young and enthusiastic cadres waiting for the new landlord–tenant relationship, he was confronted there by our biggest landlords, *Ras* Mesfin and Princess Tenagnework in the presence of the Emperor. He was insulted and ridiculed. The Emperor was saying things like, 'We know you as a communist, and understand what you are really trying to do!' He went back to his office and phoned us to come back and listen to the fate of the tenancy law. That was the end of land reform under Haile Selassie. So we went back to our research until 1973.

Haile Selassie had come back from exile in 1941 after Ethiopia was liberated from the Italians. That was the time when he lost the opportunity to reform the country. He never paid attention to what educated people were saying and he preferred to rely on the old guard. Even before the tenancy legislation there were peasant revolts in different parts of the country such as the peasant movements of Bale and Sidama. And there was international pressure also.

If you want to understand land issues, you have to go back to

Emperor Menelik. Emperor Menelik was a small king in the Amhara region. He built up his power by invading all around him. Whenever he faced resistance in his expansion southwards, the land was totally confiscated and given to Menelik's supporters. This is how many people lost their land and their lives. So what the youngsters were calling for was the re-instatement of the land to its original owners.

Had it succeeded, the landlord-tenant draft law that we formulated would have been a very big plus for the programme of reform. The draft law prevented the eviction of tenants from their holdings; the rent was regulated; and a special court was to adjudicate disputes between a landlord and tenant. It also abolished any personal services by the tenant or any of his family to be rendered to the landlord. Finally, it revoked any obligation to the landlord when the tenant hadn't sufficient for his own subsistence; so a subsistence farmer did not have to pay rent. This was a radical provision within the draft tenancy law.

We also needed to recruit a number of young diploma holders from colleges of agriculture to work as tenancy officers in different parts of the country so that they could adjudicate cases that might arise between landlords and tenants. This was a very special bill. Once it had passed the House of Deputies, it had to go to the Senate, that represented the nobility and people close to the Emperor, but it never reached the Senate. As I said, the Emperor intervened.

In the meanwhile, civil society started to believe that this was a government that did not accept reform. At that time even the Council of Ministers was behind this legislation. Prime Minister Aklilu during his trial said that it was impossible to push reform measures because they were being sabotaged by the Princess and Ras Mesfin, who owned huge land holdings. The Emperor used to reward patriots with land. Even those who were away from the country were regarded as patriots. The landlord-tenant law was shelved. Progressive reform was shelved and most people started to believe that this was a government that did not accept reform.

I decided to stay on in the department and concentrate on other

work. It was a time when everybody was frustrated and dispirited. Many of these people, particularly lawyers and economists, joined the Ministry of Land Reform, and made it a hub of modern educated people who wanted to see some sort of reform. Land was central to change. My ministry was lucky in attracting brilliant people. Many foreigners and international experts and also well-educated Ethiopians were advising us. My Minister, *Ato* Belay Abay, came from the Ministry of Planning. He decided to stick with this group. His predecessor, *Fitawrari* Abebe Gebre, with whom I had worked, was a radical in his own way – he was instrumental in the abolishment of slavery some years back. When he came to the Ministry of Land Reform he had also pushed the landlord–tenant legislation.

This was 1973. The students were rioting and shouting about the famine in Northern Ethiopia. The Emperor and his government were in denial about the famine. Although that part of the country had chronic food shortages, still other parts had had good harvests, and in Arsi, only 145 kilometres from Addis Ababa, farmers were selling grain very cheaply, so they could have transported grain from there. Ministers kept the famine secret until the BBC revealed it. After that the military took the famine as one of the reasons to blame the Emperor and his government and particularly the ministers who were responsible for hiding it.

This secrecy is a kind of phenomenon in this country. We don't want to show the world that our people are starving. This culture of secrecy is a problem. Later on the Derg hid the famine of 1984. It could have been manageable. Food could have been raised from domestic sources.

1974–1979

Working under the Derg

After the army coup in 1974, the Derg maintained the status quo. The Derg didn't tamper with the institutions of the Emperor, but all the ministers were imprisoned, including my former boss, *Ato Belay Abay*. By this time, the Honourable Justice, Negussie Fitehaweke, who had decided in our favour in the Habeas Corpus case was Vice-Minister of Land Reform. I was working under and with him on other issues. When the Emperor was dethroned, a number of Prime Ministers were appointed, one after the other. The Derg was already in power, and it appointed *Lij Endelkachew Mekonnen* as Prime Minister. He was from the nobility, and regarded as progressive in certain corners. He announced that one of the programmes that would be re-submitted to Parliament for approval was an improved landlord–tenant relationship bill.

At that time there was a mass movement for something greater. There was a total upheaval against injustices and for reform; so I thought the landlord–tenant law was not the appropriate law for us to respond to the demands of the time. Some of my friends stayed behind in the civil service, but I decided to move out; and I joined the law firm of Negussie Fitehaweke as a young barrister. (*Ato Negussie* was Vice Minister in the Ministry of Land Reform under *Belay Abay*. Both of us resigned from the Ministry of Land at almost the same time.)

But I only lasted seven months! We started taking on a number

of labour cases. My senior partner had a good relationship with big business, so many of the court cases revolved around labour cases. Imagine, I had to appear before the labour court defending the bosses and I'd see the labourers there without any representation whatsoever; no legal aid, just left alone to describe the bad things that had happened to them. This caused me a lot of agony. Really a lot of agony! I was thinking, what's the use of my education when I'm standing and defending this class of people with pockets-full of money.

I confided in my girlfriend, Tsehay Zerihun. She was working as a secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture and earning about 285 Birr a month. She saw the way I was tormented by this decision. She said, 'Why don't you resign? We can live together on 285 Birr.' That was the day when I decided to ask Tsehay to marry me!

My cousin Shibru had completed his political science at Arkansas University and also obtained a law degree at Philadelphia University, Pennsylvania. He didn't go into government, but opened his own law firm.

He was an outspoken critic of the Emperor. Even as a student he wrote against the way the empire was run. He continued criticising the Derg on many fronts. He was arrested, and we never saw him alive again. All the circumstances were dubious. He didn't appear before a court. He was never found guilty of any charge. I think, during his interrogation, someone must have struck his head with a gun, or something. All I could do at that time was to go with another cousin, Colonel Girma Zewde, to the hospital where they had taken him from the prison cell. The doctor told us he was almost dead by the time he had arrived at the hospital. We were saddened to see his body. There were a lot of bruises around his neck. He must have been beaten. All we could do was negotiate with the government to organise his burial. Shibru died very young. It's a loss to this nation. He was a brilliant person, a daring person, who wanted to change legal institutions so that the rule of law would prevail. So that is how it ended. Even if you praise my courage—it's his courage you see. At

that time, being educated in America, he probably could have gone with the young revolutionaries who wanted to change everything and were against everybody, but he wasn't like that. We really ended up being friends to the end. There were some differences in ideology. He felt the programme of Land to the Tiller was too extreme. He believed one could achieve many things progressively with a minor adjustment here and there. On this point, as he was my mentor and my role model, I probably just grumbled

without mentioning openly that I was not satisfied with his position. His mother had a lot of land, so she also lost property just like my father, but luckily I didn't have to face her or my father because they both died before the Land to the Tiller programme came into effect.

Suddenly, out of the blue, the opportunity arrived for me to go back to the Ministry of Land Reform. One bright morning, two officers, Captain Moges Woldemichael and Captain Demissie Deresa from the Derg came to visit my boss at the law firm. I was really unhappy and frustrated because I thought they had come to arrest this former official from the Ministry of Land Reform. But after a few minutes of discussion with him, they came to my office and asked me if I could have coffee with them somewhere. Imagine! Everything was running through my head to find the mistake that I had committed which might have been the cause of



Shibru Seifu Miteko. I am what I am because of him. He was the role model who brought me from the rural areas to attend school in Addis. He was mysteriously killed by the Derg in 1974.



Peasants & Students National Campaign, 1974

my arrest. I remember they took me to a coffee house and we sat down for a discussion.

They told me that my friends at the Ministry of Land Reform couldn't agree on the type of land reform that we should proclaim. Some were saying Land to the Tiller, some were suggesting progressive land taxation, and others wanted a ceiling on land-owning, and so on. They asked me for my frank opinion.

Before I gave them my frank opinion, I asked, 'Is the military really serious about this?'

They said they were really serious. They said, 'We don't want to make amendments every year. We want to have an ultimate law to end the feudal regime.'

Then I told them, 'Why don't you go for Land to the Tiller?'

They asked me, 'Would the peasants be able to defend their new rights?'

I told them, the military with all its guns are there; the students supporting them are there. The peasants have a lot of grudges, and history shows the peasants support this. I said, 'They can defend

themselves. They can use their spears; they can use their axes and everything.'

Then their second question was, 'Will you be willing to work in the Ministry of Land Reform and contribute to drafting a law pertaining to Land to the Tiller?'

For me that was the greatest moment of my life: to find some military people supporting the law of Land to the Tiller, and also for me it was an escape from the agony I was experiencing when I was defending the big guys against the labourers they had wronged.

So I started working again in the Ministry of Land Reform. Together with my friends, we began drafting the law of Land to the Tiller. We went through Chinese literature and learned how the peasant associations were established there. It didn't take much effort to find really fine articles. And while working on the draft law and the procedures for its implementation, I was called to the palace to meet with a junior officer from the air force. I went to his office and he broke the big news that I was appointed Minister of Land Reform. The Derg had kept on the civil service to run the country, but they made appointments in their military committee.

They told me to report to the Ministry of Land Reform the same afternoon. The Vice-Minister was to organise a small meeting to introduce me. I went there, and marched inside. All my colleagues were there. The Vice-Minister said, 'I'm going to introduce the new Minister of Land Reform.' When he mentioned my name, everybody was so happy.

I really wanted to run the whole show in a very participatory manner. I said, 'We're going to implement this law together.' Because I knew everybody very well, I didn't have to think much about who to appoint as my deputy or who to appoint as heads of department. The Land Reform Law hadn't been issued officially, so we had to do a lot of preparatory work before it could be proclaimed.

Even before, at the time when we submitted the landlord-tenant Law to the House of Deputies, the issue of Land to the Tiller was ripe at the university. This was the burning issue for which

I shouted the slogan on the streets of Addis Ababa when I was a student. But when I joined the civil service, having seen all the difficulties of going for a radical solution, we decided to propose the landlord-tenant law, trying to mend things here and there. Of course my bosses and even the government might have thought it was only tenancy legislation, but we would have had a cadre of young boys and girls working with the tenants on the landlord-tenant law if it had been approved. That would have given us the opportunity to radicalise the tenants, not only when applying the law but at the same time telling them that this was not what they deserved. You do not have to give free labour. You do not have to pay taxes. And of course we could even go deep into the history of land ownership in this country, how land was confiscated by the forces of Emperor Menelik, and other emperors too. So we thought that if we established peasant associations, if we raised their awareness, if the tenants were free to a certain extent, then they themselves would get radicalised. So if we didn't go directly for Land to the Tiller, we could still use the tenancy law to reach the peasants and probably spread our ideas. That was the logic. So even at that time, we were thinking about Land to the Tiller. The radical element at the university opposed the landlord-tenant law because they felt that this was still a reactionary law, but at that time we felt at least it would facilitate inculcating new ideas. Those millions of peasants were owners before they were conquered by Emperor Menelik. We believed that Land to the Tiller was a reinstatement of the original position and that in the end the former situation in the country would be restored.

I came to learn what 'political will' meant by the decisions the Derg took to facilitate the implementation of the Land to the Tiller law. Before that time all employment was controlled by a Central Personnel Agency. If you wanted experts, you had to apply to the Central Personnel Agency; it was the Agency that approved the recruitment of experts. If you needed equipment, vehicles etc. you had to go through the bureaucracy of the Ministry of Finance. But I

was given special authority to hire up to a Master's level without any interference by the Central Personnel Agency. So I could hand-pick anyone up to the level of a Master's degree without any problem. I was also given authority to purchase vehicles without going through the cumbersome process of applying to the Ministry of Finance. This was especially for Land Reform. In this case we were going to avoid all red tape, and the Derg government had decided that all the restrictive rules were not applicable.

We hired battalions of very enthusiastic young people. At this time there were some highly innovative young women and men in the Ministry of Land Reform. They suggested we duplicate the draft law and disseminate it to the entire population so that the Derg couldn't change its mind and take it back.

I was invited to explain to the full Derg Council the purpose of the law and how it would be implemented and everything. Taye Gurmru and I attended this Derg Council meeting, convened to decide on the fate of the law. And you could see that those young officers who themselves had come from the peasantry were giving all the support they could so that the law could be approved.

But there was one big question about which I was ambivalent in my response. This question was from the Deputy of the Military Council of the Derg. He asked me, 'Have you an adequate number of surveyors to survey the land?' He had not really understood that the people were going to stay on their land, and we were not going to measure anything. Colonel Atnafu thought that we were going to engage in an official register of the ownership of the land—a cadastral survey. The man needed a map with boundaries and measurements. I said, 'Yes. Everything is ready.'

I remember as we left there, my colleague said to me, 'I never thought you were the type of person who could lie!'

'I'll lie, if it comes to it, for the benefit of the people!' I replied.

The next morning, I got a phone call from the old palace and was told that I was to have an audience with Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam. He said, 'We will announce the law tomorrow morning.'

Just like that! The House of Deputies was not there! The military had assumed the role of the parliament as well as the role of the executive. There was just the civil service. I remember the spirit of victory in the Ministry of Land Reform. That same afternoon I managed to arrange a student meeting at the university. There I announced to them that the land reform bill would be issued the next morning.

And so, that same afternoon, the students marched throughout Addis Ababa and went to the old palace compound and started praising the Derg for the brave action they were undertaking. They were carrying torches and chanting songs and marched through Addis Ababa: Mercato, and Piazza—all over. Their action must have given the Derg added confidence to implement the law. On the next day the law was proclaimed, and a day or two later we organised support and half a million people were marching through the streets of Addis Ababa in support of the legislation. That gave a moral boost to the Derg. And the law gave the Derg a hundred per cent support from the peasantry.

And then the long struggle for the implementation of the bill started. By this time, the Derg had also announced that all high school students and university students were to serve national service in a literacy campaign in all the different parts of the country. So these students would be well placed for the implementation of the bill.

I think the implementation didn't take us long. Since it was Land to the Tiller, people didn't fight over boundaries. This was something that had to be settled. Each farmer was allowed 10 hectares or 22 acres. This was the maximum size of land they were allowed. There was no fighting over the land. For them it was such a surprise to be given the piece of land they used to till. We immediately established peasant associations which could also be used in part to adjudicate cases involving a land dispute. 800 hectares was the geographical area over which each peasant association exercised its authority. The students and the Ministry of Land Reform were on the ground



Peasant Rally, Sidama/Wara 1975. A show of force to overcome the great resistance of landowners. The rally was organised by land reform activists and functionaries.

too. We managed to set up something like 25,000 peasant associations all over the country, which were really responsible for a very large area.

Of course there were landlords who started frustrating the implementation of the law. These peasant associations had the authority to disarm any person whom they feared might create a problem. Peasant militia started to establish themselves in different parts of the country to protect the students who were struggling to institutionalise the peasant associations, and also to protect the peasant holdings as well as the field personnel of the Ministry of Land Reform.

I remember that at that time the Derg had a military court, where 'counter revolutionaries' were supposed to be tried. Desta Asfaw, who was manager of the Arsi Land Reform Office and who

was active in establishing peasant militia was charged and appeared before the military court. He was specifically charged with establishing a parallel/quasi 'military structure'; his defence was that he was instructed to do so by *Ato Zegeye Asfaw*.

The Prosecutor General at the military court, Colonel Goshu Wolde, who was my junior at the law school at Haile Selassie University, phoned and asked me whether Desta's line of defence was true. I told him, 'Yes, I did instruct him. Do you think the law can easily be implemented without people getting organised?' The next day he phoned and told me that Desta was free. I went to the notorious Maekelawi, maximum security detention centre, and I rescued my man.

So everybody was behind this bill except the biggest landlords. At the same time, we wanted to proclaim all land public land so everybody could have access to it provided he/she wanted it for his/her livelihood.

'Land to the Tiller' is in the lexicon of socialism, and 'Land to the Tiller' was really implemented the way it sounds. I can't imagine that all this could have happened without the government passing this law. It was the young idealists, military as well as civilians, students and teachers and professors, as well as the peasantry, who implemented this law. We wanted the law so badly and people said even if they died the next day it would be worth it.

I do get harsh words from my relatives. They call me, 'This demon!' But in his way my father was different. He was wounded fighting the Italians, and he carried a bullet in his left thigh. All the men who marched with him were comrades with him and he granted land to them. They were regarded as relatives. There was no sharecropping. My father was the one who made the coffins for the ones who died. People came to him for a coat or trousers. The farm was a self-sufficient unit. He was an extremely religious man, of course.

The land reform proclamation was the collective effort of the young sons and daughters of Ethiopia who selflessly sacrificed their

lives towards facilitating the emancipation of the peasantry. About 66,000 high school students joined this campaign. The whole country was behind it. And even in the eyes of the international community, the status quo of land ownership could not continue. The names of all those who actively participated in the drafting and implementation of the law have escaped my memory. Members of the drafting committee were:

- Alemante Gebreselassie
- Nigat Mengesha
- Tamrat Kebede
- Taye Gurmu
- Teame Beyene
- Tesfaye Shenkute
- Zegeye Asfaw

In the meantime, urban land still remained in the hands of the feudal landlords. When they were chased out of the rural areas, they moved to their beautiful villas and apartments in Addis Ababa, where they started to hire people to sabotage the revolution. They really engaged in 'counter-revolutionary' activities. I thought, we will have to start again. We realised that these people were powerful because of their wealth and property in Addis Ababa. It was decided to nationalise all urban land as well as any additional residences. People would be allowed to keep one residential house in the city and 500 square metres of land, no more. The rest was nationalised and rented out by a national rental agency established by the Derg. Under this urban law, land could be rented out for the construction of houses. Any resident could secure 500 square metres of land for the construction of shops or houses. This was the end of the 'counter revolution' by the landlords!

People who could draft such legislation were not lacking. Someone from the Planning Office and the then Ministry of Justice and myself got together to draft the legislation. There was no minister

involved. The issue was kept highly confidential. No minister knew about the legislation until it was submitted to the government!

That was the period when the greatest credit goes to the Ethiopian students and their professors who went into the rural areas to popularise literacy, but actually they ended up implementing the land reform programme. Of course there must have been a change of heart because things progressed in a very dramatic and also in a very rapid way. Some Derg members started to feel that these improvements could be a threat and would even lead to other reforms. Frankly speaking, many of my colleagues were executed for taking part in the implementation of the law.

The Derg was not an homogenous group; the majority were radical, but some were associated with elements from previous landlords and aristocrats. A number of my ministerial colleagues were executed for organising the peasants against the landlords. I remember if a student was taken to be executed by majority vote, I had to complain when they executed him. But gradually the situation improved and stabilised. The student campaign lasted for two years, but in the end, because of some of these incidents, the students were ordered to return to Addis Ababa.

So along with land reform, there was a lot of politicking going on and the radical elements started to regroup themselves and started to form political parties. I was never interested in joining such groups because my main focus was land reform and the destruction of the feudal exploitation of the peasants.

Tsehay and I were married in December 1974, and ten days later I was appointed Minister of Land Reform. Tsehay is not from the Oromo group. She is an Amhara from the north. We lived in a small villa, which took almost all of my salary from my work, but after I was appointed Minister, we were more comfortable. We were very happy for a number of years. After a year, our first son, Asfaw Zegeye, was born. Two years later, our daughter, Meti Zegeye, was born and then a year later our last son, Fiteh Zegeye.

Over the years we stayed loving each other and Tsehay was always extremely supportive. She kept on with her job in the Ministry of Agriculture. Sometimes she joked that her stomach was stretching from being a pregnant woman! We were extremely fine up to the time I was arrested later by the Derg.

I was working a lot in the field. The intensity of the marginalisation of the peasants was greatest in the southern area of Ethiopia, but land reform was needed everywhere, even in Eritrea and Tigray and Amhara. Also tenancy arrangements within the old system had been applicable all over the country. There were problems with the implementation of the law, and the aristocracy hired people to kill our functionaries. In 1976 the Ministry of Land Reform and the Ministry of Agriculture were merged and I was appointed Minister of Agriculture by the military regime. We needed to consolidate some of the work. We needed to maintain food security and to distribute food among the peasants. Nothing went smoothly for me.

I was also personally under suspicion by the Derg. I'm not certain in saying this, but I think they were suspicious of my ethnic background, because I was of Oromo nationality. I was responsible for food security, but I felt, if you are a farmer on your own land, you are likely to invest much more in it, which is good for food production – and the new law did boost food production.

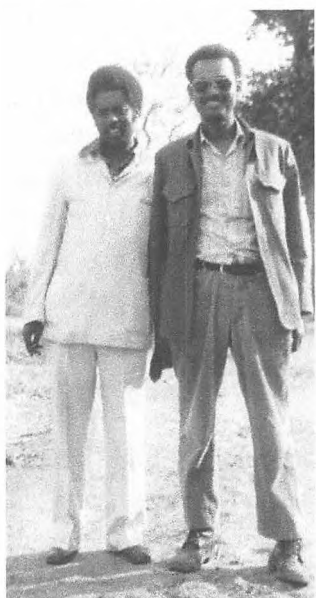
The Derg also started to wonder why the law referred to all nationalised land as being under *public* ownership. They were suspicious of me, wondering, 'Why didn't the law say that all nationalised land is under *government* ownership?'

When I went to the Ministry of Agriculture I found that the mandate to run some of the state farms, which the Derg had taken over, was also given to this ministry. These farms were the result of an eviction of peasant farmers from their original holdings. In some cases even the original burial places were demolished when they were established. So some sort of justice had to be done.

I myself supported sub-dividing this land and returning it to the



Building state farms in western Oromia. LEFT: Zegeye. MIDDLE: Birhanu Disasa (Director of the Agricultural Marketing Corporation and my work colleague). RIGHT: Abiyu Geleta, Governor of Wollega, later imprisoned, and now in the USA. Two of my greatest friends, and true sons of Oromia.



ABOVE LEFT: Zegeye with Fekadu Waqjira, Director General of the Settlement Authority, Ministry of Agriculture



ABOVE RIGHT: With student campaigners, 1975 [In the centre, with cap]

original owners. The Derg started to argue that, when they appointed me to the Ministry of Agriculture, they thought that I would balance the interests of the peasants with the interests of the government. They felt I wasn't doing that, and some brilliant idea came to them that they should start an investigation. So they appointed a commission of enquiry to investigate me and the persons who were in charge of state farms, Tamrat Kebede and Tsegaye Asfaw.

Even the composition of the commission of enquiry can tell you a lot of things. There were three members. One was a person from whom we had taken land, one was the Auditor General and the third was the Chief of the Security Department. Then the whole thing started.

The first allegation was that state farms were not producing enough food.

The second allegation was that the Minister, myself, had instructed the state farms to recognise the establishment of labour unions on these state farms. I thought Mengistu was a really brilliant man. I don't know how he came up with this argument, but in a big conference organized in Addis he stated that labour unions can only be set up in industries and factories. I told him, 'But these are labourers too. They need their compensation. They need their salaries and so on.' These were the allegations made by this judicial investigation.

Private people had established some of these commercial farms. The way they had been established was by taking land away from the peasants. People were demanding that these state farms, some of which had been commercial farms, should be returned to the peasants. The commission wanted to investigate me as instigator of these demands. They believed that I was the culprit.

I started to write our defence. I said that we were really honest and sincere and that we were trying to do our best for Ethiopia according to the national plan. At the same time, I wanted to show that there was great pressure being exerted by peasants to have the land returned to them.

I showed what I had written as my defence to a friend of mine, Abebe Worku, who I knew was much closer to some members of the Derg than I was. On the economic argument, I showed that, if the government would allow us, we could change any state farm into a profitable venture by raising pigs and poultry and other livestock, but because of our responsibility for food security, we saw the need also to undertake to grow maize and other cereals.

My friend told me, 'No. These are not the points of the argument. They haven't told you the real reason why they want you to appear before the Derg commission of enquiry. The whole point revolves around why you had to say "*public ownership*" instead of "*government ownership*".'

At the time when we framed the land reform bill there were two recognised forms of ownership: private ownership and government ownership. The entire pastoralist area was regarded as being under government ownership over which the government gave different concessions. We used the term public ownership because we wanted to *prevent* the government from confiscating land in order to hand out concessions—to friends and businesses and so on.

So we had to re-phrase our defence and explain why we used the term public ownership. Of course, later when the Derg wrote its constitution, they changed the term 'public ownership' to 'government ownership'. I don't know whether we could have saved peasants from eviction by using the term 'public ownership'.

Many writers on land reform criticise us for not using the term private freehold. Under the Land to the Tiller, the peasants had the right of *usufruct*. They had the use of the land, and could collect the produce of the land while they were working on it, and their sons and daughters could take over the land after them. People argued that we should have given the land as freehold. They used the English argument, 'An oak tree will only grow on freehold land.'

Our intention was that we didn't want the old order to come back. With freehold, there are always opportunities for the old order to buy out the peasants. Ours was a populist agenda. For

this reason, at the time, it seemed to me that it was best to give the land under *usufruct*.

The commission of enquiry decided in our favour, and said that there was no cause for further investigation. That was the first commission of enquiry that I had to answer to. We were trying to emancipate the peasantry from the bondage of servitude, and it is still true that currently the majority of the peasants are keeping and cultivating those same land holdings that they were given.

I remember that at that time we had different problems in different parts of the country. Our officers had a very active presence in Tigray as well. At that time the armed struggle was very young and the government did not lose its grip. But these young fighters were really enthusiastic about the land reform and they were agitating the peasantry, telling them that they wouldn't be able to come up with better legislation even if they themselves were in power. So they were really supporting us. It created suspicion in the leadership of the Derg because they were asking, 'What sort of relationship does the Ministry of Land Reform have with the fighters?'

There was really a meeting of ideas and I give the Derg great credit as a group and as individuals for getting the law to succeed, although there were some elements within the Derg who would have liked to sabotage the law.

I remember there was a young major in the Derg who asked them if he could be granted a permit to become a bandit in the Arsi area, where there was the worst type of tenancy. He begged them, 'Just give me permission and I will see to it that the landlords accept their demise for the first time!'

No other country has dared to do what we have done. Even the Russians, when we told them that we were about to embark on this programme, were really lukewarm. The Derg Government asked them for support; but their response was that they could perhaps provide farm implements! The Russians didn't even give us moral support. Funnily enough, after the law was passed USAID issued a statement that this was okay. It was when Mr. Carter was president.

During the later years the relationship with the United States became problematic. It was almost at this time that Somalia invaded Ethiopia (1977). All our military armaments came from the USA. We had fighter jets from the USA, but they refused to send spare parts to Ethiopia in the midst of the Somali invasion! Sometimes you can see why the Derg turned to the East. It was because it had no choice. It was the Chinese who assisted us with semi-automatic guns. The country was being invaded by well-armed Somalis. The Russians were arming the Somalis. A consignment of arms from Russia disembarked in a Somali port. We had a lot of problems trying to defend this country. And who came to our rescue? The peasants who were given land, who represented all our different nations. We mobilised 300,000 peasant soldiers to hold back the Somali invasion.

I was in the Ministry of Agriculture. I was doing the work of the Minister of Agriculture that I was supposed to do and at the same time I was also responsible for feeding 300,000 soldiers. That was an immense task, an immense task! Luckily enough we were able to defend our borders and also chase out the Somalis. So at that time the Derg had to fight internal 'counter revolutionaries' as well as the Somali invasion. The peasants were unanimously behind everything the Derg wanted to do because of the land reform legislation. We couldn't have defended our territory if it were not for the massive mobilisation of the peasants who were willing to go and die now because they had a cause to die for. So the land reform had not only an economic aspect but it also had a political connotation with very far reaching consequences. Incidentally, when the Somalis invaded, the Cubans fought on our side. They trained our army. They even fought in some critical battles.

It was a very trying time for the Derg regime. A most disturbing thing was that other national forces that were objecting to the Derg were agitating that peasants should not engage in defending their country—that that was the Derg's business. A very few political groupings, however, issued statements that the Derg was separate

from defending the territorial integrity of Ethiopia. So they were giving us moral support. We had mobilised militia from all ethnic groupings, from everywhere. That was a national thing that kept this country together. When the Derg started to gamble with and disregard the respect it had obtained from the peasants it lost their support. Obliging peasants to contribute men to the militia on a permanent basis; introducing and executing a grain quota system where families were forced to sell a certain part of their grain at a reduced price to the government; and the commercialisation of state farms: all contributed to the demise of the Derg government.

By 1977 there was no democratic structure in Ethiopia. There was no parliament. There was just the military and the civil service. The military gave the entire political guidance. The ministers were there to execute whatever had been decided by the military on political, social and economic matters. During this period everybody thought, 'this will pass, it's a transitional process and will lead to a national democratic movement. First let's deal with the basics before embarking on party politics, elections and so on.' Apart from the EPRP and the liberation front operating in different parts of the country, this was supported by all the other parties. The EPRP was always against the Derg. They were highly educated youngsters, probably not from poor backgrounds. Later on, when a contingent of students returned from the National Development through Co-operation Campaign, it was believed at the time to be because of EPRP's agitation, and the Derg said, 'these are the sons and daughters of people in Addis, whose land was confiscated!'

The Ministry of Land Reform was the hub of all these political groups! We had EPRP, we had MEISON, and we had people from small political groupings. We agreed on a common goal. 'Let's keep our politics to ourselves; and let us not frustrate the proper implementation of the Land to the Tiller programme.' Everybody was in this mode. As for the rest, we had people working for the Ministry of Land Reform who were from the EPRP who were executed; we had people working for the Ministry of Land Reform who were MEISON

members and who were also executed; and there were also some functionaries who were executed without having any affiliation to political parties. So at that time we all agreed that we should have a transition period. And the military was also promising, 'Let us do our homework, and then we'll pass through a proper election,' but it was difficult for the Derg to do this, and that is why the Red Terror started and that was how the Derg lost.

The Derg's madness to crush any sort of opposition that questioned its official line was unparalleled in the recent history of this country. This group that started with the uniting slogan '*Ethiopia Tikdem*' ('Ethiopia Forward') degenerated into a muderous machinery that had no mercy for children, youth, mothers or other people. Its policy towards opposition forces terrorised the nation, and exterminated its youth. The Red Terror was murderous, and represented the darkest pages in the history of this country.

Although we were very careful not to downgrade their authority in whatever we did, I never knew what the Derg might do to me. And during the Somali invasion, when I had to bear, with others, the responsibility of feeding the soldiers, there was an added danger because some political forces issued a life-threatening statement about me: 'There are two enemies in this country. One is Mengistu and the other is Zegeye.' So there were also times when people advised me to keep a low profile because of the threats coming from political organisations.

The Ministry of Urban Planning was under the influence of MEISON. After the land in towns was nationalised, neighbourhood associations called *kebeles* were established. High officials from this Ministry wanted to use the *kebeles* and to strengthen MEISON. As a drafter of the law and as a resident of Addis Ababa, I knew what they were about to do. I used to argue against their scheme of using urban *kebeles* as their political base. So because of that they were not happy with me. And the EPRP couldn't mobilise the peasantry because of the land reform law. So they also thought, 'The danger man is Zegeye.'

I feel the Derg's history will one day be correctly written, but with all the negative painting of the Derg period, talking even a small positive truth will make one unpopular. What I should like to do is to see the Derg from a different perspective. What they did in trying to introduce social and economic transformation was admirable. Also the dedication this military regime showed in defending the territorial integrity of this country was a great credit to it. The Derg's human rights record was brutal and ugly and should be totally condemned. I was a victim of the Derg regime, but I don't engage in blanket condemnation. I want to see things in compartments.

I was imprisoned by the Derg. Okay. I might start shouting all sorts of things, but I really appreciate the positive reforms the Derg introduced. I was close to Mengistu. He was an articulate person. He listened and tried to convince. I'm sure he started the Red Terror and was responsible for all the inhumane treatment and atrocities that followed. General Tafari was executed, probably not because of a difference of opinion, but because Mengistu must have suspected him of being a member of the EPRP as well. One of the officers who had come to my law firm to ask if I could participate in land reform was also executed at that time. There was a group in the military junta who were allegedly infiltrated by the EPRP.

Let me tell you a different story.

Solomon Wada was an employee of the Ministry of Land Reform. He was from Walaita. He was a revolutionary and a passionate supporter of the new law. The settlers there really concocted a story that he was organising people to march against a certain Amhara who was residing in Walaita town. He had to run away from his place of assignment. While on his route to Addis Ababa, he called me several times on the telephone. I was also stupid. I was answering and telling him, 'Please come to me. We can do something.' But instead he was trying to escape through Begemder (Gonder) Province to Sudan, and he got caught by the military; he was unfortunately executed. To this day I remember that incident.

I went and asked Mengistu, 'How on earth could such a thing be done under your leadership?'

And he said, 'I was outvoted.'

So that is how we lost that young, passionate revolutionary. Then there was another employee of The Ministry of Land Reform, who was responsible for one big land reform district in Wollega. There was an allegation that he also mobilised the peasants against the government. So a crew of Derg zealots was sent down there to execute him then and there. He got the message from friends working in the then Ministry of Interior. He escaped from that area and had to walk twenty-one days and nights. One early morning he knocked at the gate of my house. I opened the gate. There was Gemetchu Megersa. His hair was in disorder. He looked weak and disoriented. He was in disguise. I didn't know what to do. Because this fellow was with me, they would really raid my house! So I looked for an opportunity and went to Mengistu and told him, 'Listen, because you were outvoted, we lost Solomon Wada, a passionate revolutionary. Now Gemetchu, who is vulnerable and almost on the Derg's death row, is with me. I confide this secret to you not as a military man, but as a revolutionary.'

And he said, 'Hide him. Hide him, please, and I will tell you when he can come out from his hiding place.'

So I did as I was told. I waited for some time, and asked Mengistu what I should do next. He said, 'Now he is free.' No one on earth will ever believe this story! This was how the young revolutionary Gemetchu Megersa survived. He went to Kenya to do his BSc in Sociology at the University of Nairobi, then he obtained his PhD in Anthropology at SOAS in London and he is now living in Addis Ababa.

These are two humane incidents I know about Mengistu. If you confided anything to him, Mengistu would listen. Maybe historians will also start to investigate instead of being swayed by the propaganda of today. In the early stages, Mengistu wasn't confident that the civilians would go with him and so he was extremely worried.

And gradually he managed to assemble educated people to run the different ministries. In those days the slogan of the military used to be: Ethiopia first, without blood.

I really admired him as a determined leader, but I don't approve of his human rights record. That was the worst thing about him. I do not know who in fact was responsible for feeding these military guys with all sorts of ideas from the Bolsheviks, ideas about what happened in China, what happened in North Korea, and so on.

I'm probably one of the civilians he respected most, and even liked the most, but the problem was my membership of ECHAT. This was a small multi-ethnic party of people with a strong rural background. We were trying to establish a new political grouping by assembling people from different nationalities —Tigrayan, Amhara, Oromo, Kambata, Wolaita, Gamu, etc—but it was not urban based or urban led. There was great suspicion that some of the leaders of ECHAT were also in the OLF, and Mengistu always believed that I had close links with OLF.

Unfortunately, as the years passed many of the soldiers died during the struggle. It's a long history and my ordeal did not stop there. I was cleared on all counts by the Commission of Enquiry. But they decided in the summer of 1978 to transfer me to the Ministry of Justice. I remember Mengistu calling me to his office and telling me that these last four or five years must have been very tiring for me. So I was to be given some rest and was appointed Minister of Justice. I was really frustrated. I was certain Mengistu was under the influence of many people who did not agree with what I was doing in terms of pushing and protecting the interests of the peasants.

When I was in the Ministry of Agriculture, I was managing a budget of 550 million birr. When I got to the Ministry of Justice, the budget was 3 million birr! But I kept my cool and tried to make some improvements within the justice system. One important thing that happened before my appointment in the Ministry of Justice was that many previous landlords who felt mistreated by the land reform, out of revenge felt that this was their time to press charges

against the peasants for the return of a flour mill or the return of broken chairs and so on. Now that I was no longer in the Ministry of Agriculture, they had an excellent opportunity.

My input in the Ministry of Justice was very small. There were well-qualified lawyers everywhere in the High Court and the Supreme Court. The Law School had also started producing lawyers at that time. At the same time, I was watching very closely what was going on in my old business. When they started bringing farmers to court, one of the governors in the surrounding areas was a Derg member, Colonel Debala Dinsa. As a matter of fact, this man was the colonel in the police force who escorted the Emperor out of his palace. He told me, 'Immediately after your transfer to the Ministry of Justice, the courts are flooded with cases that you would not have entertained if you were still in the Ministry of Agriculture.'

What could I do? Luckily the Penal Code provides that the Minister can bring to a total halt cases that he thinks are against the public interest. So I issued a letter to all the courts in the country that they should not take up these matters. So, still, weak as I was in the Ministry of Justice, that letter was the final seal against the landlords' efforts to reinstate themselves.

A friend of mine joked, 'Zegeye is such a lucky guy! He committed a lot of mistakes in the Ministry of Agriculture, and now he's been given authority as Minister of Justice to clear them up!'

I tried to do a little judicial reform and to improve the system of appointments and so on.

In normal circumstances, when the Derg, or Mengistu went round the country on an official visit to give guidance on whatever was being done, development ministers would accompany him. Now I was in the Ministry of Justice, so I didn't have any opportunity to accompany Mengistu to explain what was really going on. And there were these other ministers, officials from the Ministry of Agriculture and from different development ministries accompanying Mengistu. At the time, Mengistu had assigned me to develop a law on co-operatives, to write it up and to defend it

in cabinet. But at the same time there were many people accusing me of things I had not done. If Mengistu pointed out a problem, people would say, 'This must have been done while Zegeye was around.' There were even attempts to convince Mengistu that my successor couldn't discharge his responsibilities as long as I was in the cabinet because they felt that I had been in the cabinet a longer time and had made friends there. And so any problem for ministers was my fault.

Ato Hailu Yemenu, who was chairing the Council of Ministers as a Prime Minister, used to call me: 'Have you done this?' I'd say, 'No, I haven't. It's not me!' Okay, after a week or so, he called me again, 'Have you done this?' I'd say, 'No, I haven't done it!'

People were really misrepresenting me. There was a freeze on salary increments for all the staff. My successor raised the salaries (against the law) and that infuriated Mengistu. He said, 'No, it's not me. Zegeye did it.' So I had to defend my skin as well as doing my assignments, and at the same time I was protecting the peasants from all sorts of accusations. I had to defend myself because people were out to discredit what I had been doing.

I think towards the end of 1979, the Derg decided to set up an organ that would work for the establishment of the Workers' Party of Ethiopia. Among the people Mengistu consulted, happened to be me. We really shared perspectives and I was able to dispel all the doubt he had about me. I was appointed the first civilian on the executive committee of this organ that was established to start the preparation for the Workers' Party of Ethiopia.

It was an executive committee chaired by Mengistu himself, with other military personnel, and I was the only civilian appointed to the committee. I was given a letter to leave the Ministry of Justice and move to this committee. I was given a new task, to be in charge of the Peasant Department. I was very happy because I was back where I belonged. There were objections to my appointment, even postcards were produced blaming me and questioning my ethnic background because they thought I'd bring all my baggage with me,

and influence the task of the committee. Actually, at the time, many of the political parties were not functioning well, and this could have been the beginning of a proper Workers' Party of Ethiopia.

1979–1989

Imprisoned by the Derg

I was convinced that I probably could work with Mengistu and also that I could bring my input into the formation of the new party, but I didn't stay more than a month in this post. I was living in my apartment. Tsehay had just given birth to our third child, who was only thirty days' old. Early one morning, a military officer knocked at my bedroom door and told me, 'You are wanted.'

My first question was, 'Is Mengistu alive? He said, 'Yes'. I thought it was some sort of coup and that those who were disgruntled with the programme of land reform were coming for me. But the officer said, 'It's okay.'

My eldest son was about three years old—awake. I said goodbye to my family. The policeman marched me to the Investigation Department, which was in the old palace. I was a chain smoker at that time, of course!

They took me early in the morning, but they didn't start questioning me immediately. Around four in the afternoon, they called me to the investigating officer. In the room was a friend, Demissie Dhaba, who had been severely tortured. Severely tortured! All his clothes were loose, and he was not able to walk properly because they had terribly distorted every part of his body. The investigator asked me, 'Why are you here?' I said, 'I don't know.' 'Your colleague will tell you why you are here,' he replied.

This fellow, who was an employee of Ethiopian Airlines, said,

‘Every word I said, I only repeated what you told me to say and I called Zegeye’s name because I couldn’t stand the torture!’ The officer slapped his face right in front of me, and called another junior officer to accompany me to where I was supposed to stay until the investigation was over.

When I walked out, I met Ababiya (a Supreme Court judge) and Abiyu Geleta (Governor of Wollega), in the same place! So we were marched to where we were supposed to stay. That was in 1979. Our whereabouts was not known at all. We later found out that what had led to our imprisonment was a letter from a functionary of the Ministry of Land Reform who had gone outside Ethiopia for further education, and had decided to stay there and joined the Oromo Liberation Front. He had allegedly written letters to many Oromo intellectuals advising us to leave the country otherwise this regime might be dangerous. There were no e-mails at that time, and you couldn’t send letters by post, so these letters were supposed to be delivered by hand. Negeri Feyissa, who was supposed to have brought the letters, was also caught and badly beaten and tortured. That same evening the Ethiopian radio was reporting the atrocities of the South African government torturing the ANC. And people were commenting, ‘Are they not seeing Negeri Feyissa, who is really suffering here just like in South Africa?’ He told the investigators, ‘I have never seen Zegeye and I have never delivered any letter to him.’ They tortured him several times. ‘If you want him, you can have him, but, honest to God, to this day I haven’t delivered any letter to him,’ was all he said.

Apparently, after my release, some people (who volunteered to know the circumstances of my arrest) said that the chief Minister of Security went and told Mengistu that they had the letter, and it was only because of this information that Mengistu decided to have me arrested.

Another thing people told me was that Mengistu gave strict instructions that they should not touch my body, just to take my

statement, and that was how I escaped the Derg's torture. All my friends, the other Oromo, were tortured.

We were told not to wash our bodies, we were told not to wash our hair. We were not to call our relatives. They didn't know where we were. We couldn't get proper clothes and food from them. And so we were really invaded by lice—all of us. I was the only able-bodied guy in this prison cell. People wanted to scratch! I was doing that for some people because their arms were really twisted or broken from the torture. I couldn't believe the experience, that they would torture the kind of people like Abiyu Geleta, a Harvard graduate who could lead this country! They kept on torturing people, torturing people! They had different ways of torturing people. The torturers were trained in the GDR and the Soviet Union. I couldn't stand this situation and I was wondering whether I was in a dream world or whether I was in an Ethiopian world. They used to give me valium to cool me down.

The place where we stayed was in a corner of the old palace, where they kept the people who were about to be executed. They brought them from different places, and put them with us. The next week they would come for them. So you can understand the anxiety. You could never know whether or not you were on the list to be killed. The food they were giving us was leftovers from the soldiers. Sometimes you would find napkins in the food, and all sorts of dirty things, but the survival instinct is so strong, we had to survive on it otherwise we would die. When they had tortured people, they would send them back to the cell. We had to feed these people, otherwise they would die. The next day they would repeat the process. We even wondered, 'Why do we support these people—we have to massage them, and feed them and yet tomorrow they will be back in the hands of the torturers. They want to question everything, make us sign and implicate ourselves so that they can try us in front of a military court.'

I was called to the investigation unit at one in the morning. When I got there, these tall men—military guys—were standing

there. My investigator was sitting down. He said, 'We are going to close the case today. We have all the permission we need from Mengistu to do this.'

I replied, 'Don't bother torturing me. I would prefer to die for the Oromo cause. Give me the paper. I will sign for you that I am an OLF member. But if you ask me another question, I won't know the answer. You will end up torturing an innocent man who happens to be part and parcel with these guys. I am determined it is better to die than to be tortured. Do it if you want. I will sign for you, but you can't get any credible information from me, because I don't know anything.' That marked the end of my investigation. And they said, 'You can go back to your cell and stay there.'

We were tortured for two consecutive years. Six of us were separated and told to stay together in a cell. That place was where the executioners came every afternoon with a list of names. You could see the blood flowing in us in the afternoon until such time that we knew we were not on the list. They used to give me Valium. We had no mattress, just one blanket and we slept on the concrete.

We didn't have anything to read: we were not allowed books; we were not allowed newspapers. We weren't even allowed to play games because we didn't have any games. We were not allowed to read books, particularly the Bible or some eastern philosophies that teach a second life, because such books would strengthen the prisoners to withstand torture. One man who came to that place taught us some yoga tips, which we really took as if it was a religious thing because it really cools you down. And that was how I survived in the Emperor's palace. When I was transferred after two years to the Maekelawi Maximum Security prison I had no ailment, but I couldn't control my hands because the mental torture had been so great.

When you talk to Ababiya he will tell you what it was like. He is a very astute person, and also a person who could even tame the soldiers. Even the gate where we used to stay was called the Ababiya Gate after him. The two years 1979–1981 were the toughest time

imaginable. Some months I really doubted my own existence. I wanted to hasten the process and sign the confession, but there was no evidence. It was just all sorts of stories.

Three of us were lawyers: Abiyu, Ababiya and myself. The chief investigator used to come to us and insult us. ‘You motherfuckers, you destroyed my case!’ This fellow started accusing us, saying they couldn’t get confessions because of these three lawyers. They were looking for other grounds to have us executed. There was an economist and also two labour leaders, the six of us were together and the investigators started to spread rumours about us, ‘Forget getting a confession as long as these people are here.’ They kept us in separate cells, even when we had to visit the toilet, we went at different times.

I saw many honest people dragged to their deaths. They would come and pick them. That place was really awful. Nobody could visit and you couldn’t tell anybody. These were gangsters who liked to get a confession by any means so that they could be promoted. The person who was doing all this torturing was given a high medal of honour by the military government.

Then from this security cell we were all transferred to Maekelawi Maximum Security Prison, where we found many of our colleagues. We had a mattress and a blanket and our families were allowed to send food. At that time my wife had left the Ministry of Agriculture and was working for the Ministry of Health. She used to earn about Birr 600 a month. Imagine feeding me and clothing me as well as looking after our three children! That was an insurmountable task. My cousin on my mother’s side, *Gashie* Shitaye Woldehitsan relieved Tsehay from her responsibility of feeding and caring for me during my entire stay in prison. He was like a father to me, being always there for me. He said to Tsehay, ‘Forget Zegeye as far as his upkeep is concerned, his food and clothing.’

Finally, after our transfer to Maekelawi Prison, I was allowed to see my family. By then I had been in prison for a total of six years.

My eldest son was nearly ten years old! The children were asking if this man happened to be their father.

At that time anybody who became a victim of the Derg was regarded as an anti-revolutionary. Even your neighbours ran away from you. I was a revolutionary some years back, now I was anti-revolutionary. Something I regret to this day is that I did not confide in Tsehay about all the politicking I did. I did it by myself, thinking that I was protecting the family. One of her grudges has always been, 'You kept me in darkness all these years. You ought to have told me about your small group meetings.' So after two years we left this miserable place of torture, although I still remember how it felt. When you go to prison you find university graduates in mathematics, physics, engineering, biology, geology and all subjects. The culture of educating each other was really there. Everybody wanted to learn something because our stay there was indefinite, or we didn't know how long it would be. Rather than wasting their time, people were trying to educate themselves. We also had a system of food rationing. The food that was sent to each person would be shared with everybody. Primacy was given to those who had been recently tortured. Even the way we lay down to sleep was worked out. Normally there were about twenty people in one small cell, so one person sleeps with his head down, the next one fits in next to him. Those tortured get priority over food and also space so that nobody touches their tortured body. Ababiya was in charge of the food rationing. He also accompanied people who complained about certain ailments to the small clinic. He recorded all the medicine so that we even shared some of this.

We kept the compound impeccably clean. It was washed every morning and every evening because we thought that if typhus or any disease came into the prison, we would die. So it was the cleanest place. When a new person came, he was asked to put out his clothes, everything, so that they could be disinfected. We were afraid that people could bring in sickness.

We were able to convince the colonel in charge of prison security

to let us start education classes. We told him that some of us could really help our juniors to study academic subjects and also other specialist areas. So we were allowed to have one security cell outside the main compound where we could start running classes. There were also language classes like Spanish, German and English. I was lucky to become the director of this school. Many prisoners who had not reached high school were able to take academic subjects. When they reached Grade 12, they would be transferred to a better prison. This motivated everybody. And for some years the students from the prison came top in the matriculation results—with many scoring Grade A.

There was an advantage to becoming director of the school. Accompanied by guards, I was able to leave my cell to fetch our ration of books and exercise books and so on. That also motivated me to get out into the fresh air. But I was careful. I could have raised money and bribed the guard to take me to my home, but I said, 'No. They trust me. I won't do that.' Many students took their exams and finished their school work with us and then moved away to the big prison and stayed there until their sentence was over.

We had classes in different European languages. Imagine locating a competent Spanish teacher from Cuba. A Sudanese prisoner taught Arabic. Usually an amnesty was declared every September by the Derg regime, so during the summer everybody was hopeful and rumours spread that the chance of release was coming. After September everyone went back to their books. There would be another year ahead now.

After eight years, four of my colleagues were executed: Mohee Abdo, Gezahegne Kassahun, Kebede Demissie and Yigezu Wake. They were called out by their names and then they never returned. In the morning, when relatives came with food, they said the prisoners were transferred to another prison, but we knew very well that they were gone.

I didn't have any idea when I would be released. There was no charge, no nothing. The year before I was released, my wife was

offered a position in Burundi with the World Health Organisation. She came and asked me whether I would permit her to go to Burundi with the children. Burundi is French speaking and my kids were attending the *Lycée*, so there was no problem. She said she would return with the children when I got released. I agreed to that. Asfaw was starting to grow up into a tall fellow and she was afraid he might be recruited into the militia; so the best thing was to run away. I replied, 'I don't know whether they will release me or whether they are going to kill me, but I think this is the time to save the next generation.'

I was released after ten years, in September 1989. I asked Tsehay if she could return now that I had an apartment of my own and a small job in the Ministry of Agriculture, but she said she had decided to stay outside. So we were separated. After my release I started to process a visit to the family. They created all sorts of excuses not to allow me to go. Later on I did manage to get to Burundi and saw my children and we talked together in a very reasonable way. I completely understood her position and she also understood the



Family re-union, 2 years after my release from prison.

Tsehay Zerihun is in the middle.

difficulties I might encounter if I left Ethiopia. The WHO offered her a transfer to Eritrea, but she refused. She had bitter problems with Eritrean politics. By then my eldest son had finished his Baccalaureate at the *Lycée*. She had enough money to send the children to international schools. Asfaw was accepted at a university in France. As a student he wasn't asked to pay for anything except for his upkeep. Tsehay decided to leave the WHO and went to the USA. She managed this on an Ethiopian passport which is something so difficult. I had the opportunity to visit her there also. The children were deep into French culture. They were criticising everything about America, right and left. Tsehay managed to find a school, but the children were saying, 'This is bad. Take us back to France.' She didn't have any money. I didn't have any money. She convinced the authority to transfer them to a better school in Maryland. Luckily they liked it there and stayed on until they went to university.

My pride was destroyed, my profession was gone. I couldn't help Tsehay with anything. I always cherish and honour Tsehay for everything she did. My eldest son has a PhD in Biochemistry from France and works at Newcastle University as a researcher. My daughter is a lawyer working for urban planning in the USA. My youngest son is an MBA graduate from a respected business faculty at Chicago University. Tsehay brought them up. She did well. Now she has American citizenship. She asked for asylum there. Maybe my story in the prison was a help to her. So I lost my family. I often remark to myself that I am an absent father. My children have grown into respected adults, but they miss the socialisation process that I could have given them. I missed them growing up, but my suffering would have been much worse if my children had stayed behind, uneducated. That would have destroyed me. So the decisions my wife made were really fantastic. I used to say that if we ever happen to come together again, she is going to be my heroine forever. We are on talking terms. We laugh and joke with our children about the past, but still we remain separated.

1989–1995

Transitional Period

When I came out of prison, my old house had been rented out. My wife and children were not here, so it was my cousin, Shitaye, who came to fetch me. He took me back to his place, where I stayed and he gave me advice on what to do and what not to do. Particularly he told me not to have any bad feelings against my friends who had never ventured to visit me in prison because during that time the Derg was very strong, so people were afraid to come, and he told me that people would come to his house in the evening, people I had not seen for ten years, and I should understand their position.

I stayed with him for about six weeks. He's a practical man and he told me, 'You can't stay with me any more, because if you continue doing this, you probably won't start looking for a job.' So after six weeks I rented an apartment. He let me use some of his furniture, which he transported over there for me. All I needed to buy was an old fridge and a bed. When I moved there, I didn't have a job. People were afraid to talk to me, let alone offer me a job! However my immediate successor at the Ministry of Agriculture was still there and he facilitated my employment as a Food and Agriculture Organisation National Consultant seconded to a liaison office in the Ministry of Agriculture. He was really kind to me. He said, 'I won't let you drive a government vehicle, but I will assign a driver to take you to work and so on.' Also Almaz Wondimu, head of the NGO unit where I was placed, contributed immensely to my rehabilitation.

I found that the Land to the Tiller programme was still working well, although the peasant associations that we had established as a civil society development were now converted into the political apparatus of the Derg regime. They had become more or less reduced to yes-men as a result of party indoctrination; by this time, they were regarded as part and parcel of the party structures. They really did what they were told. That was how the Derg were able to mobilise all these young people into the war front against liberation struggles within the country.

In addition to having to send their youngsters to the war front, one of the critical issues the peasants were raising was the quota system. If they produced ten quintals of grain, they had to sell five quintals to a government parastatal at a reduced price. Their patriotism had started to wane!

Immediately on my release, I looked for an opportunity to talk frankly with a group of peasants and to assess the situation. It was a time when block peasant support had started to wane. They still talked positively about the Derg because of land reform. They disapproved of the Derg because of what looked like an endless opportunity to recruit youngsters to the war. The Derg's influence on the peasantry had started to decline when it started tampering with the free evolution of the peasant associations. The other issue that pre-occupied the peasantry was the quota system. There is a saying amongst the peasantry, 'All governments walk on the backbone of the peasants, and if they shift a bit, all governments will collapse.'

And they had really made that shift because the pressure on the peasants was very harsh after the grain quota was introduced. Also, joining a collective/producers cooperative was never madatory. It may happen through a voluntary will, but as you know there were these enthusiastic cadres who, wanting to have fast promotion, were reporting on the establishment of collectives all over the country—a blatant lie.

In fact, in 1990, when the Derg was about to collapse, it issued a statement saying that the collective farms were no longer the way

forward. If the peasants wished, they were allowed to dismantle the collective farms, so the pseudo-collectives were dismantled that same morning! They also stopped the settlements, the village-isation, and people were allowed to return to their original homesteads,

I remember that when I was in the Ministry of Justice, before I was imprisoned, there was a big gathering of important ministers from the Ministry of Planning, the Ministry of Agriculture and the Military Council, all accompanying Mengistu around the country. Everyone in turn stood up and endorsed the village-isation programme saying that it was the only solution and so on. I was there. I was so afraid to say anything about this type of thinking, but I raised my hand. Mengistu saw me. He said, 'Are you going to object?' as if to imply, 'You'd better think twice!' I said, 'No, I'm not going to object, but I'm going to try to explain the environment under which village-isation survives.' I started to explain the Tanzanian experience and the Mongolian experience, and how these had failed because they did not establish the necessary services before just bringing the people and cattle together. And I also suspected that by gathering people in a particular geographical area, the intention was to create large tracts of empty land for the use of the state.

Everyone was shocked that I was arguing with Mengistu. And then it was *Lij Mikael Imiru*, an educated aristocrat, who was appointed as Prime Minister after the Derg collapsed, who spoke up in support of what I had said even though Mengistu was present. He said, 'Zegeye is correct. In other countries, villagisation takes place more or less around national boundaries. In places where your border is threatened, you can settle farms to defend the border as well as farm the land. The sort of villagisation you are planning never works.'

Mengistu said, 'This discussion stops here. We are not going to discuss this any more.' And I believe that was one of the reasons why I lost favour with Mengistu, because I had really objected to his grand plan to change the rural landscape. Over the years

he eliminated any opposition and at the height of his authority he started to behave like Kim Il Sung, with closed courts and everything.

A year or so before I was released, four of my colleagues had been executed; and four of them were left behind in prison when the rest of us were released. The four men called me. They warned me that as long as they remained in a maximum security cell, all moves I made should be weighed very carefully and that I should not do anything that might undermine my personal efforts to secure their release. The Derg would be watching me to see if I had any plans against the government and they asked me even to accept a position within the Derg if it were offered to me.

Now the collapse of the Derg was imminent, and a new prime minister was appointed to salvage the situation. Tesfaye Dinka, an outstanding Ethiopian with impeccable leadership qualities and experience, asked me whether I would join his cabinet (still under the Derg). What he had to say to me was powerful. He said, 'Do you really dare to run away when I ask you to be a member of this cabinet?' I was also mindful of my friends still in prison and how they had advised me to accept anything the Derg offered me. So I was offered the post of Minister of Community Development and Social Affairs in 1991, almost at the end of the Derg regime. I accepted that position for two reasons. Firstly, I really believed in the sincerity of the new Prime Minister, and secondly, because it was the first time that a person from my national ethnic group, an Oromo, had risen to this level of authority. So, four days after my appointment as the new Minister of Community Development, now an official of the government, I convinced the security to release my friends on the grounds that as they hadn't been charged, there was no reason to detain them further. It wasn't even twenty days later that the Derg collapsed!

The new rulers, the EPRDF, issued a proclamation that all former Derg officials should hand themselves in. I was in trouble! I had friends in all national groups—Amhara, Tigrayan—all of them. I

telephoned the man with whom I had been working; in fact, he was Tsehay's former boss in the Ministry of Agriculture. I asked, 'Do you think I will be in danger?' He replied, 'Wait for a day or so.' I did, and then he called me back and said, 'I don't think there is any problem with you.' I went and reported myself.

I found myself with all my previous jailors! They started to sympathise with me—'You are just coming out of prison, and now . . . ' I replied, 'I pity you people who have had no experience of hardship. I wouldn't mind repeating the same process because I know the drudgery of prison life and the difficulties.' Suddenly someone called my name and said, 'Go back home!' My association with the Derg ended there!

I went back home. Immediately after that, the EPRDF came into power and invited all the different political affiliations to join in the transitional process. The OLF and TPLF were the closest to each other of all the other political groupings, and the transitional chapter was crafted mainly by representatives from these two groups. Some of the leaders that came were victorious OLF fighters. The mood of the Oromo nation was at its highest pitch. A cloud had lifted and everyone rallied behind this group. I remember everyone marching through Addis Ababa, waving flags of liberation. It was remarkable. The TPLF invited all the other groups. They got rid of the Derg and imprisoned its officials.

The OLF came too. I am a strong affiliate, I support their programme, I am an Oromo through and through. Some of these people were my university friends. Some were ECHAT members who ran away from Addis Ababa. The esteem and reverence people pay to the OLF is not because of material things, but because there is a belief that liberation comes through the OLF.

In 1991, all the political parties were represented in Addis Ababa. The OLF were given twelve representatives and I was one of the twelve. We were all from different areas, but knew each other. The leadership would meet and discuss separately, but behind them were a few of us advising them as they drafted the transitional charter.

The transitional charter opened a new chapter. It recognised, for the first time in Ethiopia, the value of human rights, and accepted all international human rights law as a guide and source of inspiration during the transitional period. After the transitional period, we would have a constitution.

The OLF group asked me to accept an appointment as Minister of Agriculture in the transitional government. I was there in 1991 and 1992. As a national expert for the Food and Agriculture Organisation, I had been seconded to the Ministry of Agriculture, so I knew everyone there. I was at home there. We tried to make a lot of reforms. The biggest problem I faced was that many of the officials in the Ministry of Agriculture—economists, agronomists, livestock experts and so on—had been in the Workers' Party under the Derg. That wasn't a secret—it was required. I was tolerant of people's past affiliations, but there was an official from EPRDF, who came from London and not from the field. His major pre-occupation was to chase out all the young and middle-aged experts who had been members of the Workers' Party. He had no conception of what life had been like here.

The Deputy Minister was Professor Mesfin Abebe, a soil scientist. To build this ministry up to a world standard, we had to reform the entire extension system so that farmers would really be able to talk with persons who understood their language. Up to that time extension agents in different areas had been assigned at random, whether they knew the language or not. We found sometimes only one guy with a diploma in agriculture, who could talk with the peasants. In some areas we found no-one. But this official continued to pester us. He called us by a name. He said, 'The Ministry of Agriculture is like a gourd, nobody can penetrate it.' I replied, 'You have no right to cause havoc in the Ministry, which I lead.' I and other officials were of the same opinion, telling him that as an assistant in the Prime Minister's office, he was not a commander-in-chief and that we could defend our resolve at the level of the Council of Ministers.

I remember they asked an expert from the Department of Monitoring and Evaluation to assess the viability of a particular estate, and he came back with a report. The Prime Minister congratulated the leader of the study for his excellent report and his letter acknowledging the excellent performance of Hailemariam, the Extension Officer, was copied to me. So I took a copy of this official letter to *Ato* Tamrat and told him, 'These are the very people you were telling me to send away!' So the normal business of the Ministry of Agriculture proceeded unaffected.

We were also trying to undo the work of the Derg—the politicisation of the peasant associations and their link with the party. We wanted to reorganise the peasantry. Everyone was talking about agricultural investment, but leaving out the peasants. They were asking, 'How can we promote agricultural investment?' People were threatening to change the way the land was held, to the detriment of the peasants.

Then it was the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. I attended with the Prime Minister, and with my deputy and the foreign minister. On my return, I heard that the OLF had withdrawn support from the transitional government. It was just before the regional elections were to be held. The OLF had heard that the whole of the regional administration of the elections would be in the hands of the TPLF. We raised our concern, but the organisers said that the regional elections would be conducted under the present arrangement and could not be changed. So the OLF left the government before the regional elections could take place.

Imagine, because the TPLF was in charge of everything, there was a fear! What will these people do? OLF had candidates in different parts of the administration. There were supporters who were in prison. And then it was almost unbearable to continue under such circumstances. All of us in the OLF had really joined the transitional government in the belief that they would restructure the empire. There was a great enthusiasm that this transitional arrangement

would succeed. So when the regional elections were undermined, the OLF pulled out.

According to the OLF leaders, Meles was of the opinion that he would not take responsibility for the lives of OLF ministers and we were advised to leave the country. That was how I left. I went to Burundi to visit my family, and then flew to London. I stayed in Kentish Town for about two months. I didn't ask for asylum in the United Kingdom. Then I went to the United States, and also there I didn't apply for asylum as some did. I was working as an advisor in the Oromo office in Washington, USA. I stayed five months in Washington, but I spent most of the time in the library of Georgetown University. I had no role in Washington. I was so far away from home! I was living in a house with other OLF people and my great cousin had given me \$2,000, but I had to spend it carefully.

In the end I came back to London. I started to worry, 'What am I doing in this damn place with my grey hair?' The advice from friends in Washington and in Addis Ababa was that lawyers educated outside America and the UK aren't qualified to work there as they have a different legal system. The only work I could get would be as a janitor! I was undecided whether to stay or not. At the same time there was a great conference in Addis Ababa which was set up to draft the constitution. The secretary of the OLF received a phone call from the organiser of the conference in Addis Ababa. He said that the Prime Minister had given a 40 day moratorium (no arrest or any charges) to anyone who would come to participate in the conference. After that they would have to return to places from where they have come. The secretary of the OLF was reluctant to give an answer. I spoke to Abdul Abo Bora who was arranging the conference. I said, 'Can you send me a ticket tomorrow? I'll be attending this conference.' Everybody frowned on me. 'Why are you going? How can you do this?' My answer was that you had to fight in these legal forums. Our safety was promised and all the nations were aware of this.

I packed and returned to Addis Ababa. This conference was

really an event in its own right. Abdul Aba Bora, a civil society activist, and Professor Andreas Eshete were the organisers. I was given a topic on how land should be held under the new constitution, and we also participated in the grand debate on the type of federal arrangement that we needed.

I wrote a paper on land rights for the Inter Africa Group. They were a regional NGO working mainly in Ethiopia, and they organised the constitutional conference. This paper was influential in defending the Land to the Tiller programme and keeping it as part of the constitution.

I had used my time overseas reading and studying different constitutions and electoral systems, so I was well prepared. This was an opportunity for me. I participated in the discussions on the federal arrangement and the voting structure. We had constitutional lawyers from literally all over the world—America, Britain, India and more. I was pushing hard for proportional representation, but the EPRDF wanted ‘First Past the Post’ as in the British system. Because we have 84 ethnic groups, it seemed to me that all these different people should at least be represented somehow in the parliament. I was fighting for this end. Many of the constitutional lawyers had experience of proportional representation, but it was not their business to argue for it.

The situation was that there were four main political parties which represented the different regions, and the small parties wouldn’t do well at all. In addition, you might have many different people living in a small town, but small towns are swallowed up by an ocean of peasants of a different group. I remember someone saying, ‘Do you want to have a system like Italy?’ No. But we are not like Italy. I studied the rationale for the ‘First Past the Post’ system. In a place like the United Kingdom, issues like this are settled, but here everybody needs some sort of representation. In the end, a fellow from Hebrew University said to me, ‘I totally agree with you, but this argument is just dead here.’ They just decided to go the easiest way. This still affects democracy in Ethiopia.

I stayed my forty days in Addis Ababa and started speaking with people from different embassies like the British Ambassador and the French Ambassador. They were advising me that it had been a mistake for the OLF to withdraw from the transitional government. I remember I was staying in my old neighbourhood and after forty days the security people started following me around in their cars. I complained to the Chief of Security, whom I respected as a sincere revolutionary. I said, 'Why are you following me?' he denied that these men had received instructions from him, and after that the surveillance stopped.

I remained in Addis Ababa and went around talking with people. I was clear in my mind that I had no business in Kentish Town or in Washington, so I went back to the OLF to declare, in a very direct way, my intention to return to Ethiopia. They warned me, 'You have to consider the danger you are about to face, both from OLF rank and file and from the government. You could end up in prison.'

But I replied that I preferred to stay in Ethiopia and do what I could do over the years. I came back. Imagine! I didn't have a job. I didn't have a salary. I didn't have a car. My cousin gave me his own car and told me I could pay him back over two years. So I had my house and my car. The only problem was I had no salary and only 67 dollars left from the \$2,000 my cousin had given me. I had to be frugal in everything. I was on my own. My brother's youngest son, Gezahegn, was staying with me. He was attending elementary school. And another guy, Ahmed, who felt he was being persecuted in his region for his political views, was also staying with me as a guard. We were a little family. We shared everything. From time to time, if I needed little delicacies, I went to my cousin. I didn't want to do much. I just wanted to sense what was going on in the country.

I kept hearing that the EPRDF was really very close to the OLF. Why don't they work together, I thought, if there is really such a great affinity between the OLF and the EPRDF? At that time talking with Meles was not so difficult, so I arranged a meeting through

this security officer that I knew. 'I'm an old man,' I told him. 'I want you to tell me the problems you have with the OLF.'

Meles made three points. The first was: There is a suspicion about whether the OLF will support peasant ownership of land. (This was a strange thing to hear, as an Oromo.)

The second was: Whether or not the OLF is ready to accommodate other national groups within Oromia.

The third was: Whether the OLF is ready to see if the federal structure really works properly. This is an issue for the transition.

These were issues we discussed often. I said to Meles that it was a simple matter for the OLF to clarify their position. I told him, 'I'm here. I'm not on OLF business. I can communicate these concerns to them.' Meles replied, 'If the questions are answered positively, the problem will be resolved. Then we can get together and discuss other issues.' I had to go to Nairobi to meet the OLF and discuss these points with them.

I was not successful in Nairobi. I was trying to find a place where the two leaders could meet—Meles and Gelasa. The OLF answered all the questions positively, but they demanded that a second transitional conference be organised. Meles reacted by saying, 'If they don't recognise the transitional government, I can't do much more because I also have to defend my position in the transitional government.' Even after that, they engaged in open discussions and met informally outside Ethiopia, but the broken trust could not be mended. Meles was saying, 'The 1995 constitution is a guarantee, the electoral system is laid down. Come and participate in the elections. If you beat us, you can have your place in the government.'

I am not a member of the Ethiopian Elders Committee. They have asked me to join several times. Many efforts have been made, but nothing much has materialised. The offer that was made was fair. Now the OLF is spread all over the world. As years have passed, fissures have developed in the organisation itself. The main Oromo group wants a people's referendum. Others want Oromo independence.

I failed to convince the OLF, so I returned to Ethiopia, but I didn't want to return to the government. This is very controversial. The best way to put it is: I am a strong Ethiopian, but also a strong Oromo. I am not a member of the OLF, I don't attend conferences and so on but, as a proud Oromo, the postponement of the Oromo question gives me grave concern.

Over the years I hoped that Tsehay and I would be able to get back together again, but time could not heal her wound.

1995— Hundee: the Root of the Tree

On my return from Nairobi, I had a little money saved, and I was really living from hand to mouth. I was living for the most part in my house, and working as a freelance consultant.

1. I did a study of gender in three agricultural communities for the UN Food and Agricultural organisation. I worked with a team of women trying to apply the methods of Robert Chambers. We were only two male experts. The first community was in Wollo. Mixed agriculture was the mainstay of the local economy. The second community was in a pastoralist area. They had a livestock-based livelihood. The third was in Gambela. They had no livestock and cultivated their crops with a hoe. It was an interesting piece of work and useful to the Ministry of Agriculture.
2. Then Oxfam America had a programme in north Somali Region and in Somalia proper. Many of the NGOs there were not aware of the opportunities available to them. The consultancy was to bring these NGOs to Ethiopia so that they could have an opportunity to see how the NGOs operate in this country and to make a comparison with their own operations.

That gave me an opportunity to go deep into the study of NGOs. Before this I had always been in government. I had never done

consultancy before. Luckily with the money I was paid, I was able to buy the car my cousin had allowed me to use!

A group of us—the majority were Oromos who had been kicked out of government offices on the pretext that we were suspect—began discussing what we could contribute to our people without establishing a political party or becoming part and parcel of the civil service. Some were young and very enthusiastic. I thought we should establish Hundee, an NGO. At the beginning we were five founder members. One OLF colleague who had left the country decided to come back, just like myself. (I don't know whether I had motivated him!) We clung together for our own security. He was Abera Tola. Later on he became Regional Director, Oxfam America. He worked full time with me as my deputy in Hundee. There was a lady from the Department of Sociology at Addis Ababa University, a veterinary doctor, and a business man. We met in my house because we couldn't pay office rent. We drafted a memorandum of association and registered it with the Ministry of Interior. We needed to develop different forms and receipts for the registration. My cousin Shitaye Woldehitsan came to our rescue and donated Birr 10,000 on condition that the name would be 'Hundee Oromo Grassroots Development Initiative'. He said, 'I must see the word Oromo!' He was a businessman, a graduate of Haramaya University here. Other youngsters started joining us. Among them were Alemayehu Diro, Aba Melka and Teshome Yohannes, who had been in prison with me and who is now heading our micro finance.

We were about six or seven. All we had was commitment and the belief that one day we could raise funds for this organisation. We didn't have money for house rent. A landlady must have been a sympathiser of our past history because she allowed us to use her villa for a year. So we moved into this place near the American Embassy. We had no money for furniture, so we said, 'Why don't we bring one chair and one table from our houses so we can set up this thing.' Some people even brought a coffee kettle, tea, and cups. We were sitting there. None of us had any salary whatsoever.

I was the chairman of the board. I lived in the house and the others were coming there every day from very faraway places. During the rainy season they didn't even have spare shoes! I remember that for our lunch we had this long bread we call 'poor boy sandwich'. The woman who was working for us in anticipation that she would be employed as a secretary, cut this long bread into small pieces and put tomato and green peppers inside, and we shared it. That was the only lunch we had.

We survived. Sitting there without any project, we developed a small brochure about Hundee and what we intended to do. It was hand written! By this time, we were registered. We started sending it to different agencies. I remember we posted it on the bulletin board of SNV, a Dutch organisation. After a number of weeks, they called me to their office and said, 'We have no money to offer you right now, but we can assign Lisette Massink to you, who will come every morning to your office and teach you how to develop project proposals and monitoring etc.' All of us enjoyed her stay with us. She stayed about a year and gave hands-on capacity building to Alemayehu so he could start developing a fundable project proposal for the new NGO. Lisette must have reported to the Dutch organisation that we were serious, because later on they offered us one salary, a salary for one member of staff. How should we divide it? We thought Alemayehu should take the money. He refused. He said the money should be divided. We said there should be only one name on the payroll. We convinced him, but we didn't even have a payroll! The Dutch bought us our first computer and our first printer.

Alemayehu Ketema, a contractor, donated Birr 5,000 to the new NGO. So we had managed to mobilise Birr 15,000. Now it was urgent to implement a project within a year as there was a possibility that we could be de-registered. So, although we had only Birr 15,000, we started to develop a project for Birr 39,000. Any project had to be approved by the government. 'How on earth are you going to implement this?' they asked. We said, 'All these experts are here.

Their salary is paid.' We were given permission to have our project appraised, and it was approved.

We started the first tree nursery in a place called Dire, Mulo *Woreda*. The idea was that farmers would buy plants from us in a cost sharing arrangement. Initially they would be on loan and later they would pay back. At this time, getting a piece of land to set up this project was extremely difficult for a former OLF official and a former OLF functionary. There were these cadres who said, 'They shouldn't get land in our district. These are remnants of OLF, a counter revolutionary organisation. We don't know what agenda they are carrying.' But relatives in the same area took a risk and gave us land—2,500 square metres to establish our first nursery.

Over the years these nursery projects have grown into a Department of Environmental Protection. We grow mainly eucalyptus trees which the farmers are eager to cultivate for selling as scaffolding, or to improve their homesteads. We grow fodder crops and also indigenous trees to improve the forests that have been devastated for fuel.

Around the time we established the nursery, we were given a small amount of money by CARE Canada—Birr 30,000. We wanted to use this money to educate women in the same locality on women's rights. We held a workshop there and many women came to it from different *kebele* (neighbourhoods). Everything went fine the first day. Participants started to talk about the agonies they suffered at the hands of their husbands. How they weren't allowed any control over the land they work on. They spoke about the different types of gender-based violence and harmful traditional practices. They were really enthusiastic and pouring out their stories without inhibition. Abera and I were facilitating. Alemayehu was there too.

The second day, a bunch of policemen arrived and five of us got arrested. We were recording the proceedings for the report we were expected to submit to the donor. The police thought we were recording for the BBC. At that time, everything foreign was suspect. They told us, 'You are not allowed to record things. You are even

saying that human rights are not given by the government, but something God-ordained. You are probably agitating that women resort to other means if they don't get justice from the court system.' We were told that we had to spend the night in the police station, but we negotiated with them. We said, 'Listen, we have a permit to do what we did and probably you might regret later on if we submit a complaint.' They said, 'We don't care. You are breaking the law.'

But we managed to convince them that we should spend the night under guard in a small local hotel nearby the police station. In the morning we went back. They hadn't started the investigation. A woman who was working there, preparing tea, happened to be from the neighbourhood where I grew up and where one of my brothers was still living. So, through her, we leaked the story. I gave her a phone number and said, 'Please call this man and tell him this is from Zegeye, and I am detained at Chanco Police Station.' So she called the number and spoke with the Deputy Security Chief, who is now a minister in the EPRDF Government with the rank of Deputy Prime Minister. We also reached a friend, Sue Tatten of the National Democratic Institute, Washington DC, an organisation supporting the democratisation process in Ethiopia.

We had a good link with the lady heading this organization in Addis. In the afternoon she and Daniel Bekele, another lawyer, came with bail money. The station chief agreed to release only three of us. Abera and I were told to wait for an instruction coming from Addis. Abebe Worke came in the afternoon to rescue us.

In the meantime, Sue Tatten (Executive Director of NDI) must have leaked the story to Amnesty International. So Amnesty ran a big picture of me. They were speaking on our behalf saying, 'He can't go through this second ordeal, having been a prisoner of conscience during the Derg period.'

Late in the afternoon, an official came from the zonal administration. He asked us what we had done, and we explained everything to him, and apparently the recorded proceedings of the workshop were copied and sent back to Addis. What we had said was that

human rights are God-given. It's not up to either Meles or the transitional government, and nobody can take them away. What came back was, 'Isn't this what we are also saying? Where is the crime?' They instructed Dhaba Debele from the zonal administration to go back to us. So he came back and broke the news that we were free to go home.

We drove back in the evening. The imprisonment gave us another cause that we had to fight for: women's rights. Women's land rights, women's protection against harmful traditional practices and so on. So this programme became the biggest programme in Hundee. We now formed a Department of Community Education and Women's Empowerment.

I happened to meet Calvin Pigott, the First Secretary of the Canadian Embassy. I mentioned to him, 'It is great that Canada through CIDA is doing a lot of good things, but it only deals with those big NGOs it knows well and the big guys.' Without being offended, he just said, 'Try me.'

The excitement of getting funding from CIDA inspired all of us. We put our heads together and wrote a 100,000 birr project to start a savings and credit scheme for women. We managed to establish a good case and Calvin wrote us a cheque for Birr 100,000! And when I brought that money back to our small office, everybody was jumping up and down with jubilation. So we managed to implement that programme very well. This substantial grant also emboldened us to seek for other sources.

The detention of personnel on flimsy grounds and our harassment by political cadres came at an early stage when our NGO's operation area did not even go beyond the geographical area of a *kebele*. We committed ourselves to expand our outreach and a mobilisation project fund became the pre-occupation of us all. We managed to approach an American NGO called Pact Ethiopia. They had what they called a Strategic Action Grant. We were probably the first with a few others who were given this Strategic Action Grant. At that time in Sululta, Mulo *Woreda*, all the co-operatives or peasant

associations that had been established had been dismantled. People had lost all collective feeling as a result of the mismanagement of co-operatives during the Derg period. It dawned on us that production alone without marketing can't work. We were not able to give extension services to the farmers, but at least we could assist them in the marketing of their produce. The grant from Pact Ethiopia was for Birr 120,000. It came originally from USAID.

We were becoming more successful. Our team stayed the same, but we were able to employ people to run the co-operatives in the local areas. We used the money to set up marketing structures where farmers could store and keep their crops. The other portion of the fund was set aside for revolving loans. During the harvest season, the price of grain collapses because of over-supply. This usually takes place because farmers need cash to pay for taxes and for the repayment of loans etc. Our theory was that we should buy this crop on behalf of the farmers when the price is low, sell it as the price escalates, and then give the profit back to the farmers. They were producing grain, so we didn't need refrigeration. The process would continue until the farmers, through the co-operatives, were able to generate their own capital.

This was my first encounter with USAID money. We only saw the money, but not the complications it entailed. We were expected to produce invoices for the crops we purchased on behalf of the farmers. We were really stuck! Delegations came from Washington to inspect the way we used the money. They agreed that what we had purchased tallied exactly with the figures we had given. However, USAID demanded that we produce an invoice for every purchase. What they said was, 'Everything works out, but there is no invoice.' This was really untenable. Farmers don't give invoices in Ethiopia. They are uneasy about paying extra taxation. Finally, USAID was advised against this reality, and we were able to expand.

Now Hundee has managed to set up over 130 co-operatives. We have also introduced a new concept. It's not the supply side that is important, but the demand side. When farmers produce products

to satisfy the market, they can create a value chain. For example, if they clean their crop, it will fetch a higher price. If they sell frequently, it will fetch higher prices. If they build and use flour mills, permanent structures, this will add value to their crop. Educating farmers to add value is empowering for them.

Over the years we were able to get support from different agencies from all over the world and were able to branch out further. We were able to set up decent living quarters for elderly people and provide small income-generating activities for them, while through the co-ops we were able to purchase grain to give some food assistance to those who are unable to work.

At one stage the government decided that NGOs are not good financial intermediaries, so we were prevented from engaging in savings and credit. So Hundee had to establish a microfinance institution, called Busa Gonofa. It's a share company now. When we had to establish Busa Gonofa, apart from Alemayehu and the present manager of Busa Gonofa, Teshome Yohannes, we didn't know anything about these microfinance institutions. Also we had to raise Birr 200,000 equity capital. Many donors weren't happy about giving us this money because they didn't know if we were capable of managing it. Luckily we were working with World Solidarity Movement, a Flemish movement from Belgium, and one of their insurance companies gave us the Birr 200,000 equity capital to start the microfinance institution. We had to draft a memorandum of association, but we really didn't know how. We asked a banker to assist us, but he wanted to charge us 60,000 birr just to help us! We said, 'No. By no means. We are university graduates. This is a challenge. All the information will be on the internet. We have to go inside and really work it out.' The three of us sat together, went into the world wide web and got all the information about microfinance. I drafted the memorandum of association, submitted it to the national bank and it was accepted without objections. Later on the Dutch came to our rescue and called it internet microfinance.

Experts had evaluated it and said that, except for a few minor adjustments here and there, the pilot scheme was on the right track.

Later on we started to get capacity building from many NGOs. Now we have between 70,000 and 80,000 clients. Over 70% are women—women farmers, businesswomen. We had to start with small loans to test whether they were credible, whether they would pay back. We began with urban girls: selling food, local drinks, petty trading, and also farmers who needed money for fertilisers etc. Since these people are poor, they have no guarantees for the banks and the banks won't look at them. Our guarantee was peer pressure. Women try to convince other women to pay back their loan. Then they can graduate to higher loans. Some of them have now reached loans of Birr 20,000 and have branched out into different activities. For me, this is like coming from exclusion to be in the centre.

Usually women heads of households are the most marginalised. Wanting to assist them, we were arguing amongst ourselves how Oromos used to support each other in the past. At one of our meetings, a certain lady told us about the way our communities used to help each other in the olden days. We asked her, 'How?' She told us, 'If I am a cattle rich individual and I don't want my environment to be degraded, I give two, three, or four heads of cattle to friends and relatives to look after. When I decide to take back my cattle, I would give them gratis a cow or so. That was how rich people were able to help poor community members.'

Okay, we started looking around. There were no cattle rich individuals. We prepared a project proposal and submitted it to our donors. The essence was: we will buy an improved heifer and give it to a woman-headed household. If the first birth is a heifer, after eighteen months she will transfer that heifer to another woman-headed household. We called the programme *Dabaree*. It means pass over of cattle. The women also establish solidarity groups with each other. I can't express the success we have achieved in terms of changing the lives of these women-headed households. They are

improving their diet. They are partly drinking and partly selling the milk. They are sending their children to school. They have started to improve their houses and to build up their household assets. This is a popular programme with donors in Europe.

We realised we were more or less always dealing with adults. We started to ask questions about the children. Are they getting sufficient attention? Are they getting enough food? Are they protected from harmful traditional practices? Are they allowed to participate in the decisions affecting their lives? We decided that these questions should also be part of Hundee's concern. A German Lutheran organisation came to our rescue and gave us money to start this work. We don't give money directly, but we assist three children within each family by enhancing the asset base of that household through the transfer of cattle, or small ruminants, to breed, and also educating families on the rights of their children to be protected from harmful traditional practices.

Pastoralist communities, nomadic people always suffer from droughts. Lately we have started to operate in drought stricken areas. We don't give food hand-outs, but educate people in how they can mitigate or recover from some of these disaster situations.

Hundee is a small grass-roots organisation. Our belief is that you can't get anywhere without organisation. We organise rural women into what we call self-help groups. They organise themselves. We have thousands and thousands of these groups now. We don't march into communities. We are there for them, to educate them on their rights, but we really involve custodians of the culture, elderly people, especially elderly women. The saying is, 'You can't just cross a boundary. There are rules for that.' We don't go in as an intervener. We open generation dialogue. How women, boys, children, men can engage in a collective dialogue to improve the condition of women. This has earned us a lot of respect in rural communities. They talk about us as their children. Hundee means the root of a tree.

When they say Oromo Hundee, political parties don't like this!

People interact with us more than with the government. We go there for discussions and to get advice. The heifer programme came from a suggestion from an older woman. When we engage in women's issues, we invite elderly women to assist us. We ask about female genital mutilation, whether this is part of our culture. They say, 'No, this is recent.' We talk about widow inheritance. Many women hate this system where an elderly woman can be taken over by the young brother of her deceased husband. Imagine a mother being forced to sleep with a person she brought up as her own son. People say this is our culture, but when we investigate in depth, we find the practices are not allowed in the mainstream culture: the rule is, you can't do this without the consent of the widow. So we hang onto the consent and try to link it to the position of women. Another case is, if my wife dies, right at her burial I could stand up and appeal to the family of the deceased. My appeal is to have the younger sister of the deceased as a wife. The rationale is the children will be well treated if their aunt takes over. There are all sorts of gender based violence in traditional practices.

There was strong support from all donors for human rights education, but now, as a 'resident' Ethiopian charity [with overseas funding], that path is closed. Now, when we drafted our recent memorandum of association to get re-registered under the new charity law, we said we would continue addressing harmful traditional practices as a public health issue, not as a human rights issue. So that's how we can continue with our women's empowerment programme. Then we try to get capacity building from different sources.

The self-help groups really invoke the principles embodied in Appreciative Inquiry. This is a system of investigation that capitalises on strength rather than weakness. So the groups tell women that they have the strength and don't need to look to anybody else for support. They build collective solidarity amongst themselves. Between 15–20 women organise into one self-help group. They start saving on their own. We don't give them any credit. Sometimes

they save only 25c a week, but that money appreciates. They start internal lending to each other. This stops them from having to pay high interest rates for microfinance. They start to build solidarity among themselves. The point is they sit and discuss the situations in their respective households. They defend women's rights in their respective neighbourhoods. In some cases, if a husband batters a wife, they will go in a group and ask him why he is beating his wife and report him to the administration.

We don't provide any money for the primary groups, but three to five groups will form a cluster where their representatives start to engage in wider activities. If they need money to boost the wider economy of the groups, Hundee will provide a revolving loan or link them to microfinance institutions.

The self-help groups are in hundreds. They start teaching their friends when they meet. Our idea is not to establish this or that unit. They have started child protection programmes, a welfare programme. These are their own children. All in all, Hundee supports grassroots movements beneficial to the community at large. We also participate in creating enabling environments for the development of civil society, women's empowerment, or programmes for eradicating harmful traditional practices. What we do will always have an element of sustainability because we can't stay in one area for long. We phase out when the project ends. Community problems should be solved by the communities: our role is to accompany this self-development. The problem is there and must be solved by the people themselves.

I decided to marry a woman, whom I had partnered for a long time. Roman came into my life not alone, but with her granddaughter and grandson, both of whom I cherish immensely. She is no longer working for any government department or business enterprise. Her major pre-occupation is to care for her grandchildren and her husband, who has turned his mind against any suggestion of retirement. Now our children are growing very fast, and Diana has started to fill some of my inadequacies that come

with old age. Addis is not a comfortable place to live, particularly for a person with a limited space to manouvre. Roman understands my past and is sensitive to triggers that may take me back to my bad years. Her love and her companionship are the source of my strength. She is a wonderful person.



With Roman and my grand-daughter and grandson, Diana and Simon

Prison memories

A conversation with Ababiya Abajobir

Ababiya Abajobir joins us. He was imprisoned at the same time as Zegeye (1979–1989) and Zegeye has asked him to contribute to the memories of their incarceration. He is a handsome, jovial man who greets everybody in The Lime Tree Café in a most friendly fashion. As the story unfolds, he jokes about their terrible experience, demonstrating his strong belief in the healing power of laughter.



Ababiya: Zegeye and I were at law school together. I was close to him. First he was ahead, and then you went out and taught for one year, I think, didn't you?

Zegeye: It was University Service.

Ababiya: I graduated first. I went into the Ministry of Justice, Zegeye went into Land Reform. He made history. I went into the prosecution for some time, then I taught law at the University in Addis Ababa. Returning to the Ministry of Justice, I was an inspector, a prosecutor, then I became a High Court judge and then a Supreme Court judge. I served during the time which was the end of the Emperor and then the beginning of the Derg. We all went to prison in 1979 within a few hours of each other. They came first to my house because the prosecutor knew me. We used to hang around together. They came to my house asking if I knew where Zegeye's house was and then they picked him up. They thought we were conspiring because of the letters that were written from abroad by the OLF officials. One letter was delivered to me, but a letter was never delivered to Zegeye. I wasn't surprised to receive the letter, because one of the OLF officials was my in-law, a relative of my wife, and the others were friends of the same age and we shared ideas. So I wasn't surprised. What was a surprise was that the boy who delivered the letter didn't come back. He disappeared. I didn't know what was going on. Apparently he was being checked. He demanded to leave the country. Then we were in the palace.

Zegeye: As I told you, Ababiya was excellent at public relations. He could even manage these people, even the enemies there, except one guard who was very antagonistic towards him because Ababiya had given a fifteen-year prison sentence to his brother who was involved in the slave trade. As for the rest, I think Ababiya was a big, big character. Many of us survived in prison because of him. I told you how he used to arrange that people going to the latrine

would sit side by side, so they could share information. What the investigators were looking for was maybe to catch us in a lie even if what I said was true. They would say, 'We have investigated Zegeye and he said you met in such and such a place and discussed this and that.' I might even have denied this story. Then if Ababiya had his chance of being investigated he could repeat my denial and then everything was in confluence.

Ababiya: The boys were talking in the latrines through the corrugated iron walls. It wasn't a big deal.

Zegeye: It was a big deal. The guy who was organising this might not have considered it a big deal, but many people escaped torture maybe once, twice or even three times because there was no contradiction between their statements. So one of his big achievements was this. He was also very helpful in the treatment *after* torture.

Ababiya: I learned first aid as a boy scout and as an older scout so I knew about setting broken hands and broken legs. And I knew also about anti-pain, for instance vitamins and helping people to relax because they needed sleep. I was using psychology. I'd tell them they were going to be all right, tell them some stories, jokes. I'd make them smile by force! I remember one friend. He was lying on his back. He had been beaten—he was so dilapidated, I had to help him, he needed help. I put a hat on him. I said, 'We need to take a picture.' He said, 'You're joking!' He was laughing.

Zegeye: Solomon and Kelem were beaten. I remember you were treating them and you were saying, 'This is cold treatment.' I remember thinking, what is this cold treatment? Immediately after the torture he dipped their feet in cold water so that they wouldn't bleed internally.

Ababiya: When they came back from the torture room, they had

a high temperature. The cold water disperses the blood and the limb doesn't swell up and this reduces the pain afterwards. I put cold towels on the feet and on the back. I got this from scouting. Of course we needed to massage as well, and after massaging we used to tie up the arms or legs. We didn't have any bandages, but we tore up sheets into bandages and used cartons and tied up the cardboard with the bandages, like splints.

They would be better the next day, provided the torturers didn't come in the morning and repeat the process.

Those young boys were in for an economic crime. We straightened out their legs and their hands – they were youngsters, one of them was thirteen or so and the other about twenty. They were quite all right in the morning when they woke up, but at eight o'clock the guards came for them again. But we kept on treating them and they were all right in the end.

Zegeye: There was a moral question: You show humanity if you help people who are in agony, but, on the other hand, are you strengthening this fellow so he can be beaten in the morning? So what is the right thing to do? There was a lot of debate among the prisoners, but when you see their agony, a few minutes of respite is really great. And you can also hope the guards don't come in the morning. You may be preparing the boys for another round of torture, but it's better to make them feel well overnight as the torturers may forget to come. Don't wait for the consequences.

Ababiya: We didn't have water for washing, which was part of the torture. They used bugs and vermin, and the food was terrible. We weren't given food from relatives. If you are beaten, unless you are properly fed, the wound doesn't heal. We didn't have mattresses, we didn't have blankets. I was a Supreme Court judge when in court, but here we were treated like animals.

Zegeye: The prison was for all types of prisoners. We were all together in different cells—TPLF, ELF, EPRP, religious groups, EDU.

Ababiya: The interrogators were trained in East Germany and used East German tactics. They also used what they called the pulley system. They put water in a big barrel and put detergent into the water. They'd hang the prisoners upside down with their hands tied. Then they would slowly lower them into the water, the eyes, the ears, the nose, the mouth. We used to call that a cold shower.

Zegeye: When you were tortured, Biya, what was your weight?

Ababiya: I was 120 kilograms when I was arrested.

Zegeye: These tiny torturers really couldn't lift him up!

Ababiya: Being overweight was an advantage!

Zegeye: They didn't get what they wanted. After six or eight weeks Tefera came and cursed us because he said we had spoiled their investigation. He cursed the whole group.

Ababiya: We heard later on that the outcry was so great that the Soviets told them to stop torturing.

Zegeye: They didn't get what they wanted. There were schoolboys—the young boys who were arrested with us. Out of torture they might say, 'Yes, Zegeye did this or that,' but when the evidence was presented before the panel that judged us, there was really nothing. I didn't receive a letter. Ababiya did nothing after receiving the letter. So the whole investigation was based on flimsy reasons. But after that, we had to endure what was done to us.

Ababiya: We heard later on that our case was presented to the

chairman, Mengistu, and then referred to six different committees, none of whom could come to a unanimous decision. They kept on sending it to another committee. Finally, he asked his aide-de-camp to lock the evidence in his desk until he could come to a decision. So we were saved from being executed because the file was in the hands of Mengistu himself. And we were kept in prison until he decided finally that we should have amnesty after ten years. That was after the coup that didn't succeed, and then also many generals were grumbling about keeping us in prison, locking us up for ten years without grounds.

Zegeye: I was called to Ato Kasa Gabre's office. We used to be colleagues in former years, and we had also tested each other when we had to mobilise 300,000 militia during the Somali war. So he was somebody who felt the injustice. He kept his cool until the opportune moment arrived. I was escorted by guards to his office. He had a recorder like this one we are using now. He asked me, 'Are you willing that I record this statement?' The question was, 'Are you OLF?' I said, 'No.' 'Ababiya?' 'No, nothing.' I told him we were all taken on flimsy grounds. I knew the risk he was running. He said he would take this recording to Mengistu himself. I returned to my cell. It was six months later that we were released. So Kasa Gabre was also someone who was really bitter about our imprisonment because he knew that what I was doing was proper. He also knew that sometimes Mengistu became infuriated about the things I do. It was Kasa Gabre who talked with him. So these people also contributed to our release.

Ababiya: This is a really nice point that I want to add. Any time a Derg official, or a minister, or anyone important came to the prison house in this time, he always wanted to talk to Zegeye. I think this was because of his innocence of heart, and his honesty also. Whenever Zegeye spoke with them, you knew he would say something positive and they believed him, including the Security Minister,

including the prison chief. The prison chief was so impressed by the way he answered him that he formed a committee of appeal, and he came back with the committee, and we started corresponding. That was the beginning. The prison bodies had confidence in Zegeye. Even the investigators had respect for him. The regard they had for him was very different from what they had for us. Later on I was involved in the treatment of prisoners. I had time to talk to some of the investigators. They also had pity for him.

Zegeye: Ababiya was the Minister of Health, the Minister of Food and also the Minister of Entertainment! As I told you, everybody was entitled to good food every day because Biya was in charge of all this. When prisoners had an ailment, they were accompanied by Ababiya to the clinic, so he made notes of the medicine that was prescribed. We had a medicine cupboard. Whenever somebody got sick, whether it suited him or not, he would ask me, 'Do you have panadol?' So Ababiya was responsible for our health.

Ababiya: The more anti-pain they took, the less pain. This is the way the thing was administered. Each cell had its own health and food administration representative. The overall head of the prisoners was the Capo, the Chief. This office changed, but I was Capo twice or three times. Everything was done through delegation. They would report administrative problems to me—quarrels over plots of land, for sleeping!

Zegeye: I think the federal structure was so right.

Ababiya: There were 12 cells and about 20 to 60 in each cell—overall about 500 men. We had a system of federal administration. There was equity in this. We had strict rules. I'll give you an example. There was a militia boy with very little education. We had a TV and whenever it rained, the TV was outside on a veranda. The boy was sick, he had 'flu. I said, 'Don't move. Don't go out of the house,' but

he slipped outside and was watching TV. I found him and gave him a slap and sent him back to bed. The next morning, he presented a case to the Capo against me. I had the power to dismiss him, but I didn't. I bowed down to the evidence. The judgement was: 'You made a mistake. You are a doctor. A doctor doesn't smack his patient.' I said, 'Okay. What is my punishment?' 'You have to give him a flask of milk and a flask of coffee.' That was my punishment. The boy was very happy!

So everybody who came into the prison knew they had a type of relationship with a *pater familias*. The Capo was the father, just like in society, in our country.

Zegeye: Ababiya used his leadership to serve that purpose. There were also people in the prison who were on hunger strike. When the officials heard this, they usually said, 'Why don't you give them to us, we will accelerate their death!' I assumed the responsibility of talking these people out of their hunger strike. One of them was the colonel from the Sudan who was teaching Arabic at the school. I told him, 'If the Derg finds someone on strike, who refuses to eat, they will say, "Please send him to us! If you want to die, we will give you a fast death!" There is no propaganda value in this!'

Four men *were* executed. It was terrible when they were executed. It was around ten in the morning that they were called. I was playing chess with one of them. They went and never returned. The sad thing was that we were celebrating a graduation ceremony for prisoners who had taken accounting courses. One of the top graduates, who was to receive an award, was executed that morning. We knew deep in our hearts that something had happened. We couldn't cancel the ceremony, because they would say that we were 'counter revolutionary' because we were in mourning.

Ababiya: I was teaching Law and French. When that unfortunate day came, Zegeye was playing chess with one of those who was executed. I was standing outside talking with this Labour Union

President. He suspected something. He said, 'Have you heard anything?' I said, 'No.' As soon as I said that, his name was called. Immediately, he knew. He said, 'You see.' He just shook my hand, and left me in tears.

Zegeye: The school started after six or seven years of our imprisonment. It was at the time they allowed our relatives to bring us books. Not political books or religious books, but simple fiction and language courses. When we appealed to the governor of the prison to run a small school, I would have to go outside the prison to get materials for the school. Now, when the relatives came to visit they would give you food and sometimes money, and with your money you would want to buy something from outside which you could keep under your pillow, probably to eat when you weren't happy with whatever you had been given by the prison. So when I went outside, people would give me a list, and I used to purchase things for the prisoners, and the prison administration allowed me to do that.

Ababiya: As Capo, I was in charge of everyday activity in the prison: washing the compound, building the school, cleaning it, the food, TV time, and then, sleep. Zegeye went beyond the day-to-day activity in the prison. He would say, 'How can we improve our lives?' He came up with the idea of the school. He came up with the idea of entertainment, outside activities, ping-pong, TV, sports. He even got them to give us a small plot to cultivate tomatoes, cabbages and carrots. All these innovations came mainly because of Zegeye's influence. That happened I think mainly because of the personality of Zegeye and the influence he had on the administration. Whatever he asked, they would not refuse him. If it had been me, they would have said, 'No. there is something behind this. He's never done this before!'

The Colonel used to come and visit us. He used to come almost every week and sometimes if he was just passing by, almost for his

own recreation. And he'd talk to the students, and ask, 'What are you learning?'

I'd say, 'I am learning Geez.' (The old Bible language). His reaction would be: 'Astonishing! An Oromo learning Geez! Is this guy crazy?'

This was a humanising influence, and due to Zegeye.

Zegeye: We used to teach secondary education subjects. There were young students in Maekelawi Prison with us, who, after they had graduated, could be moved to the big prison to take their matriculation. That was the greatest motivating factor for the young ones. Going to the big prison was like half freedom because they could see their relatives every week, and it had a more relaxed atmosphere.

Incidentally some of them were coming first in the national examinations. Some of them went on to university. One of them became a minister later. And the students had nothing else to do except study.

Every September we expected amnesty. If it didn't come we had to wait for another year, so we'd go back to our books. That was how we spent the time. The school curriculum was the same as the government curriculum. If it were not for such things, I feel the prison would have been so miserable.

What I observed was that the generosity and humanity that existed among us inside the prison—you don't find it outside at all. Shame! Shame! And now everybody is spread all over. I hardly see Ababiya. People don't meet any more.

One of the four guys who was left behind when we were all released, and who asked me to do everything to get him released as well, he was given asylum in Canada with a small amount of money for his upkeep. He is suffering from heart disease. I visited him once in Canada and he told me that in terms of humanity, in terms of socialisation, in terms of observing what is good in human beings, Maekelawi was far better than Canada. He is living in a clean house and gets his food, but man does not live by food alone. He is missing those human relationships that used to exist in the prison.

Ababiya: Because of this humanitarian spirit from people like Zegeye in the prison, we had success in taming the investigators themselves—the torturers that gave us misery, the soldiers in there. The atmosphere in the compound was so friendly and humorous to the extent that if one of us was sick and had to be taken to the hospital outside the prison in Addis Ababa, the soldiers would even suggest we go to our own houses and meet our own wives and children. And I happened to be one of them, and my last daughter is the result!

And that happened because people like Zegeye introduced, into the prison life, the taming of the guards. It was very good. Another thing, information is a very important matter in prison. The soldiers go outside, when their shifts are over. They come back with small notes from our relatives, our wives and our boys, wrapped up in a flask or even in *injera*. It was a great thing. When the notes came, the soldier would be sitting with the prisoner, reading the fruits of his labour. When we were released, many of them came to our houses to congratulate us and offered us food—sheep, chicken!

There is a small break because the café owner offers us pancakes and honey. Perhaps he has recognised Ababiya or Zegeye, or perhaps he would like us to order again. Indeed, Ababiya does order pancakes to take back home to his daughter.

Ababiya: The chief of the torturers was called Lieutenant Ishetu Andarge. I was driving in town. He stopped me and asked, 'Is this your car?'

I said, 'Yes.'

'Can I get in your car?'

'Please come in.'

'Can you give me a ride to my house?'

‘Yes.’

He said, ‘I always curse the day I tortured you that night.’

I took him to his house. I didn’t stay long, I was sick at that time, but we began meeting. Unfortunately, he died. I say unfortunately because I believe he could have given us lots of information. It shows the way we turned them. The way we changed their minds! The way they began understanding that we were innocent and that the ones who were responsible for our imprisonment, the Derg officials, were crooked. That’s one of the things he realised, and also that he was part of all this.

Zegeye: This wasn’t because of any big heart on my part to reform the situation. You see, for example, while we lived in the Derg’s palace, we had nothing to play with. So we made chess men out of orange peel, we made the grey ones, and then to make the black ones we had to crush the cell of a battery into powder. The more you stay unoccupied, the more you degenerate in prison.

Once you start that degeneration, there is no end to it. And people are smart. Everybody is smart—they are professionals, they have something to share. Everything we did really made a difference, for example to the sanitary conditions. If it were not for our rigorous washing of the compound, and applying all those detergents, a slight contagious disease could have killed many of us. Then there was no radio to listen to. That was the situation we were in. You can’t sit and play games all day. Many of the people were really highly educated, and when you want teachers and sign up those who can teach maths for example, you find ten qualified people signing up. It is a waste if you don’t use them.

And the personality of Ababiya was so great, I was of the opinion that he could domesticate the worst guy. And you know, those guys with guns pointing at the prisoners, later on they started to become friends and started to tell you stories from outside.

Everything was arranged in a most meticulous way also in terms of food distribution. People in Maekelawi didn’t come from Addis

Ababa only, but from different parts. Some didn't have clothes. Or friends or family to visit. There were young people without any support.

Ababiya: When people came from a good family, we only asked them to shower. But others, those from the streets, we had to change their clothing and give them temporary clothing that we had bought. We took their clothes and put them in a plastic bag, and then we would tie it up and hang it up for a day or two days. After that we would take the clothes out and shake them and then wash them before giving them back. That was also for hygiene.

Zegeye: I remember drug addicts who were arrested and who came to us. At first they would be pestering Ababiya, asking if he could provide them with drugs. But as the months passed, they totally abandoned the whole thing. It was also a way of rehabilitating some characters.

Under our Capo, Ababiya, the rules and regulations on how food was distributed were written down. Usually you won't see what your family has brought for you. The good food needs to be given to those who are sick or those who have been tortured. You will get your dish when you prove you need it because of your health factor, and sometimes maybe you will expect a dish with bones. When you are down to that level, entitlement has to go turn by turn. The person in charge of food has to record who got meat the last time!

Ababiya: Whenever new prisoners came, we made it a point to indoctrinate them. For example, he may want his own dish, maybe from his own family or his beloved wife. You need to indoctrinate him that he is giving for the better use of society something that will even please the Almighty God. You are giving it for His sake to the poor man. It is important for him in this life and the life hereafter that he gives to people who are poorer than he is. It's not something we did by force, but by amicable persuasion.

Zegeye: Ababiya is a big philanthropist at heart. He would say, if you have an extra shirt and somebody comes in without a shirt, God will reward you if you give him your extra shirt. People were quarrelling with him, 'Why do you take my shirt?!' Biya would say, 'It's only in giving that you are going to get.' Biya is a Muslim by the way.

Ababiya: I also had a Christian education. I began with the Bible and then switched to Islam and then switched to Karl Marx, so there were lots of ups and downs! In my life I was dealing with Ethiopians who were Christians, Jews, and Muslims. I needed to understand their positions. I also studied comparing the Bible and the Koran. The differences seemed to me to be very minute. Unfortunately, Muslims and Christians don't compare their religions. I was in church just before the Prime Minister passed away. A lady was praying, her son by her side. He was asking, 'Who is Gabriel?' She replied, 'Don't you know? He is the son of God!' She didn't know he was an angel. The Koran is written in classical Arabic, so very few Ethiopians know that language. It's only misunderstanding that finds a difference between religions and they make war unfortunately because of ignorance, not because of things that people do.

Zegeye: To return to land reform. I believe no other country has put through such a draconian measure. And the army was determined that they didn't want to talk about land forever. They said, 'Let's give it a final blow!'

Ababiya: Land reform in Ethiopia did not come as a surprise. Both of us came from a culture of a very strong student movement. It was always about national issues. And it was at the same time that the people of Iran rebelled against the power of the Shah. You could say everybody of our age was christened by going to university. I remember, as students, we were on the streets of Addis Ababa demonstrating about Land to the Tiller.

Zegeye: To understand the politics of the land, one has to understand Ethiopian history. Ababiya's grandfather was the Sultan, he was almost king in his own area. He was dispossessed by Emperor Menelik. So Land to the Tiller was a reinstatement, to give justice to those who survived Emperor Menelik's invasion. So it is economic, but also social and at the same time political. On the delivery end, the land reform was like a renaissance for the Oromo peasants—for everyone in the south. There were small kingdoms and principalities—that used to have their own laws and their kings—that were totally smashed, conquered and the people reduced to serfs.

These grievances were always there. Maybe the people of the North may not understand the psychology of the people in the South. We believe we have been mistreated.

Ababiya: When the land reform law was promulgated, I was governor in Jima, the place where my ancestors had ruled. We brought together the former landlords. We tried to persuade them, 'Look, give the land to the poor.' Putting the law into practice was to a great extent successful in that part of the country. When the law was promulgated, not just the dry, hard letter of the law, we also went along with the social progress, the political understanding and the humanitarian aspect.

Zegeye: I had to keep the land reform law secret. I never told anybody that it was coming, but I told my mother. I said, 'Mom, you listen, you are going to lose everything that you have next month.'

You know what she said? 'Who are the ones who are going to take my land? Are they the same boys that have been helping me over the years?'

I said, 'Yes.'

'In that case,' she replied, 'God bless you!'

This explains the feeling that people had for their own, because the Oromos were really mistreated. The vast majority of the peasants

were Oromo, so they never minded giving the land as long as it was an act of re-instatement of the past.

Ababiya: It was a very good thing.

Zegeye: The majority of the army were also from the peasantry. At the present time the rights of *usufruct*—the rights to the use of the land—still hold, as well as the lifelong lease. The only thing you can't do is to sell the land, but it can be accepted for a mortgage.

But things are changing. Under the Eminent Domain, the land could be taken by the government if it was destined to be used for a public purpose like a road or a school. It was a matter for the court to decide if it was a public purpose. You could dispute the matter in the court if your land was taken. But now the government has given the authority to the administrators. They can take over the land and give it to an investor. This is the biggest crisis in land reform. There are land-grabbing Indian, Pakistani, Saudi governments, who want to grow food for their own food security, or there is the international flower industry—land reform is being affected by all these threats. But in the majority of cases the land is still in the hands of the peasants.

Ababiya: Our tenants became the owners. I persuaded my own family, even one of my team who went round to the villages and preached land reform was my own father! The supreme landlord! He said, 'Now look, someone who will be affected by land reform first and foremost will be me! Right or wrong? Right! I'm giving it up. For your sake—join me.' He was very persuasive.

Zegeye: My cousins are still cursing me!

Ababiya: When I was released, I went back to my home. I felt I needed a change. I felt I needed medication because the torture

had had some effect on me—on my legs, my back, and my heart also. I went abroad for a year and some months.

When the change came I was part of the OLF delegation at the London 1991 meeting. Her Majesty gave us a nice lunch! The new leaders met and all the parties of course. It was remarkable and when I came back home, we managed to form a transitional government and managed to convince the parties to stay together and build a new structure, a new nation. It didn't work.

Zegeye started Hundee. I had to go abroad. When the OLF decided to get out of the transitional government, I was Ambassador in the diplomatic service in Cairo. I stayed there. Then I resigned from the diplomatic service because when the tree is cut, the leaves also fall down. I went to Saudi Arabia to a big mansion built by my ancestors, where my grandfather lived.

I worked for a company as a legal advisor for three years, then I managed to go abroad, to America, because my children needed to go to college. I stayed away eight years.

I began to convince myself that peace would be the best way—the amicable coming together of the parties. I travelled to Asmara, meeting Isaias and his associates, also to the embassies in Washington and Europe. I worked for the OLF. I didn't feel young enough to go to the mountains in Abyssinia with a gun. Then I thought, let me try my best to get a peaceful way. That's why I came back here to Addis Ababa. We try to have a coalition of Ethiopian elders from the government and from political parties. We are about 25 elders now. So when the intelligentsia of the CUD were in prison, it was our coalition that intervened—in a very controversial way, of course.

Now we are working with OLF and ONLF for an amicable solution. Meles was playing a significant role. Whenever we went in peace, he opened the doors for us. Whenever we asked him about political prisoners, he said, 'Just begin talking. One day you will find the prisons empty!' We have been trying to begin to talk for the last nine months, but we haven't succeeded yet. Zegeye went to

the people for a peaceful end. I went to those with political power. That's a continuation of our peace effort in prison.

Finally, I want to add that as I am participating in the coalition of the Ethiopian Elders, we are dealing now mainly with the OLF case and the ONLF case. Here I think Zegeye can play a big role, a much bigger role than he has ever played in his life before now.

This is because every time I or my colleagues in the Ethiopian Elders go to talk with government officials or to Ethiopian political parties, the first question they ask me is, 'Is Zegeye in it?'

Whenever I say, 'No,' they feel unhappy.

And whenever we go abroad to meet OLF leaders about the peace process, the first question they ask me is, 'Is Zegeye in?'

I say, 'No.' Then they feel unhappy.

This means that his participation in the peace process now could be very important and very valuable and that would be for the future of the country and for the future of the Oromos also.

Oromo and Ethiopian

Meeting the following generation

I meet three high achievers of the following generation who have been influenced by Zegeye.

Alemayehu: My name is Alemayehu Diro. I work for an organisation called the Network of Civil Society Organisations, but prior to that I worked for Hundee for about 13 years. The first time I heard about Zegeye was about 30 years ago. He was among the few Oromo elites with whom the Oromo students used to discuss in relation to the Oromo struggle for liberation, for freedom, and so on. I saw him on television when he was appointed as a minister during the last year of the fall of the Derg regime. At that time all the ministers were on television and that was the first time I saw him, with the same grey hair actually. And then in 1991 he was part of the transitional government as the Minister of Agriculture. When the OLF had to withdraw, he left for London, and then came back a few years later. That was the first time we met, and began to discuss the current situation, what we could possibly do, as a group or on an individual basis, because at that time he didn't have a clue as to what should be done. Everybody was expecting him to do something. All directions looked gloomy; so many people used to ask him, visit him, and so forth. In 1994 we sat down seriously and started discussing establishing this organisation—called

Hundee. At that time, we were very few, some six or seven people. None of us had any NGO experience, except the commitment, the dedication to support the poor.

None of us had any means of survival. What we used to do, you know, whoever had money, would buy bread, everything, which we'd share by way of lunch, dinner and so on. And for those who couldn't afford a taxi, those who had some coins would pay for it. Zegeye's close relative gave us 10,000 birr to start a nursery. You know you have to start something within a year otherwise your licence expires. With 10,000 we went to a place called Sululta and established a nursery. I think it was very excellent, because all our energy, all our effort, was on one particular nursery, so it was taken care of very well! [Laughs]. I remember that we did not know how to write a project proposal. The first proposal was hand-written: we did not have any typewriters, no computer, nothing. I don't know if it was kept, but until very recently we kept it as part of Hundee history.

Now when you read the way we described the environment, the way we set the objectives, everything was so unsophisticated. The first project we started had only one person's salary. I remember the figure, it was 1200 birr. It was my salary. Morally it was very difficult to take a salary in the presence of those other friends, so the salary was paid in my name, but I shared whatever I received with the others.

I came to know Zegeye's family, his sisters, his brothers, all his extended family. I was interested to know his background as well, not just to work with him. You know, everybody, every peasant farmer talked about him. So many people knew him by name, and sometimes we'd go to rural areas, where he would address the people. He would talk to them and so on, and the moment they found out that this was Zegeye, the whole atmosphere changed, because they knew him by name, but not physically. I have been to remote places, like Bale—Bale is far away from here. These are pastoral communities. And I saw people actively discussing him.

I was so amazed. They began to tell me about what he did, as if I did not know him.

You know, he is from a relatively rich family, landowners. I was curious how come he was so dedicated to the rural poor. Why was he so concerned about grass-root communities? I began to think that probably the way he was brought up had some effect on his way of thinking. On his father's side, he is from a well-known clan, called Abichu. Abichu has its own history in Oromo. And his mother's side is from the other big clan called Gulele. Part of Addis Ababa is also called Gulele after that clan. And that clan also has history.

The Abichu clan is known because at a certain point in time the war leader of that clan, named Gobena Dache, joined the army of Emperor Menelik with the false promise that he would govern the Oromo land while Menelik would rule the Amhara. So Gobena is now more of a symbol within the Oromos, not an individual name. If you betray your society, if you betray your group, you are named after this name. Gobena. Gobena would mean 'Betrayed'.

Gobena was almost equal to Menelik. They were equally strong. He was cheated by Menelik when they got together, because his army helped Menelik to invade the entire Oromo region, the entire southern region. After winning the war, he was betrayed by Menelik himself. His status was equivalent to Menelik's, *Ras Gobena*. *Ras* means equal to a king. *Ras* means, 'on behalf of me'. That is the kind of title he was given. But eventually he himself was betrayed. So there is a lot of talk about this clan.

If you look at his mother's side, you will see the opposite. The Gulele clan was led by a very famous person called Tufa Muna, known for fiercely resisting the Menelik invaders until he lost the war. Tufa was the grandfather of Zegeye's mother. In history, he is known as the opposite of Gobena. And Zegeye has come from these two clans. Discussing Oromo history is a day to day, routine thing in his family. You know in my early childhood we also knew about Gobena, everybody talks about these people. Whenever we discuss Oromo history—you know this is a very oral society, this is

a very egalitarian society, so you just sit around a fire and talk about everything—that's how you maintain history, you don't have any written mechanism. We are so familiar with these two. Sometimes you tease each other. You say, I belong to the Tufa Muna side, I am not on the side of Gobena. And so forth. So, he must have been familiar with the Oromo history from early childhood, because he was very close to these two people and the two clans.

As far as his leadership is concerned, I worked closely with him. His good qualities are—he is so inclusive, he entertains ideas, even the views of others. He reads—I think Zegeye is known for that. He always updates himself. He is also very eager to share whatever he gets, by way of formal or informal chatting. He just tells you to do, to make use of whatever tools he provides for you. So I like that part. What I would call his limitations are . . . As a leader sometimes you have to make concrete, definite decisions. And especially when it comes to, for instance staff, you have to take sometimes very serious decisions, but he refrains. He refrains because he is more soft-hearted than we are. That's how I understand him. He looks at the person who is going to be a victim of that decision. He puts himself in his shoes and says, 'What would happen to the life of this man, or the life of that one?' If you reach out to him and approach him, knowing that he is a soft-hearted person, he changes his decisions. So looking at the bigger picture this might have some negative consequences.

Daniel: I am Daniel Keftassa, from Arsi. I met *Ato* Zegeye in 1976 in Kersa town. I was on a campaign, at that time. We called it Development through Co-operation. We organised a big rally of people on land issues, and it was a mix of land reform, revolution, liberation, all these concepts were in it. And I was one of the most active in organising this. So, sometimes I'd translate from Amharic into Oromo, and sometimes I'd talk myself, because at that time we were real activists on all these issues.

I belonged to that batch of students, you know, who were really

singing 'Land to the Tiller'. So, after this big rally was over, Zegeye was there and he called me, and he invited me into his car, and we talked. We just talked, and we reflected a bit about the rally, and he encouraged me and others, and then he asked me, 'Whenever you come to Addis, please come to my office.' And when the campaign was over, I used to visit him frequently in his office at Kasanchis, where he was Minister of Land Reform and Resettlement. So I used to just pop into his office, sit and talk. Deep down I think we talked about Oromo: Oromo liberation; about Oromo to be empowered; self-consciousness; and how to guide and help people to think; and also how to encourage our people through education and participation to be strong and self-reliant. Soon after, I just happened by accident to join the land reform, at *woreda* level, I was already a manager in Ziway Dugda. When I told him that I had joined the land reform, I could see on his face he was not that happy that I was *Woreda* Manager, because I was young and energetic. In late '78, the University was re-opened, and they started a programme. So I came back and talked to him. Then Zegeye concretely said, stop your work and join the university. That was really a very important moment in my life. I remember what he said. He said, 'There are many people who believe that if we construct a dam on the Katar river (Katar is a river which you cross when you come to Kersa, and he used this 'Katar', because he knew that it would be on my way) and use it for irrigation, it is very important and helpful. But only very few people know how to construct the dam. So we Oromos, we need people who know how to do it.' That was really a turning point in my life, and my way of thinking. Then I immediately resigned from work, and joined the university.

In fact, I used to want to be a lawyer. The history of the way I went to school was that my father didn't want me to continue with my education; he wanted me only to learn Amharic, because he wanted me to help him in the courts. My father was always in the court, and always lost! [Laughter]. Because, always, whatever the issue which he took to the court in relation to land, in relation to

rights, he was fighting the system, directly or indirectly. He wanted his son to help him, to liberate the Oromos and himself from the system. So at that time, really from zero up to grade 12, and even coming to university, I wanted to become a lawyer, I wanted to learn law. But later on, after the revolution, I felt, now it is socialism, it is perfect, no problem, the legal issue and the land issue are solved, now it's time to work on development. So I changed to agriculture. When I was in Arat Kilo, at the university, I always visited *Ato* Zegeye. So he really changed my life. I understood that we need to be educated. He really directed me that what the Oromos need is technical people who know what to do and how to do it, it's not only talking. So that was really inspirational for me, and that inspired me to continue. Until now.

Nemera: I am Nemera Woyessa. I am currently working for Light for the World. Like Alemayehu said, I knew Zegeye by name from 1975. People were talking about him. They'd say that there is a man who belongs to a rich family, but who stands up for the poor. Later I got to know him, and then we met regularly, and for me he is one of the icons of the Oromo people. When I went with him to monitor in the field I always learned from him. It's not just about ticking boxes. Once when I went with him, he said, 'OK you have finished your job, but I will stay with the people, because my job hasn't finished.' And he stayed overnight with them, slept there, discussed informally with them, and then came back after two to three days. This is the way to do development, this is what he taught me. When you monitor a project, you go to the people and talk to them, but you don't get the whole truth. We could have gone back and written the proposal and so on, but he said, 'This is not enough.' So always, when he went into the field, or project, he spent time with people, stayed overnight with them, and then came back. This is what I like about him.

Alemayehu: Actually, as far as I know, Zegeye shares whatever

information he gets, from here and there. In a way, if you ask any staff member of Hundee, even now, the reason why they are there is not because they are attracted by the salary or the benefits, but because they all feel that the organisation is theirs, and they will miss something of purpose if they leave. That deep attachment is there. Actually, you know, I was the closest person to Zegeye. And I feel he knows everything of who I am, and I also feel that I know him very well. I understand that his concern for people is unlimited. You know Zegeye was sympathetic to OLF, and EPRP was definitely against OLF, but so many people, knowing that they were EPRP members, knowing that they were against his organisation, his ideology, his philosophy, he still took a very high risk to save their lives. When he was a minister, he used his inside knowledge as Minister of Agriculture. When people were in danger because of their politics, he was the one to call somebody and say, 'Go to Kenya, otherwise you'll be lost.' So some would flee to Kenya, some would go to Sudan, some saved their life by other means. Some of them are professors, some of them are doctors now, living in the diaspora, and they have a special respect for him, regardless of ideology. So when they come, they say 'we are alive because of you.'

Daniel: He wanted me to understand all sides. This is the Oromo way of thinking, this is the government way of thinking, but here is also another way of thinking. That's what I learned from him. He doesn't support it, he's not part of that political group, but he follows their arguments, their papers, their writing, and he wanted to educate me also, to understand in a broader sense. It's not a matter of being changed or changing, just a matter of understanding the other side.

Alemayehu: For Zegeye land is not only the source of livelihood, the economy of the poor. He regards it as self-reclaiming, for an Oromo society, because the land that was taken by the emperor Menelik was the Oromo land. Not the Amhara land. So then the

Oromo had nothing. Without land, Oromo means nothing. Those who worked on the land were all reduced to serfs. So getting back the land wasn't only an economic factor. It was whether you exist as a people or not. Because if you don't have the country, you don't have anything. Half Oromo by then was a pastoralist community. Half was highland, and the only skill they had was tilling the ground. When that was taken, it meant we were nothing as a people. So getting back the land had its own big meaning, bigger than just a means of development.

Daniel: Ethiopian history is the history of land. If you go through the whole monarchy system from Theodoros to Yohannes, to Menelik, the whole system is around the land. When Menelik conquered the Oromo land, the people had to pay tribute to him. So the Oromos lost their land, meaning they were occupied. The Oromo occupation by the North meant that their land was detached, it was snatched from them. So Land to the Tiller was in itself, like a question of liberation. It's not just the land as land, the biggest part of it was giving back the land to the Oromos, meaning liberating the Oromo people. It's not said in Land to the Tiller, but giving back the Oromo land meant liberating the Oromo people from the Amhara colonisation. Deep down, this was the philosophy. That was the highest level of politics during the late 60's and early 70's, in the university, in the high schools. Land to the Tiller was the biggest slogan in this country.

Nemera: Unless the Derg proclaimed about land issues, survival of Land to the Tiller was under question.

Alemayehu: The biggest role that Zegeye played was that from all the alternatives he went to the extreme, whereby each and every person could get access to land. You know he was not satisfied by the rural land proclamation because—he was telling me—the people were blocking it, you know, not tabling the draft laws and

systematically delaying its implementation. At the same time all the high school and university students were behind the slogan. And he was telling me that when the Derg accepted the final proclamation, he was the first civil minister to get to the Derg palace, and when it was passed, he didn't trust them. So he didn't go back to his own home. He went to the university at Arat Kilo. He went to Arat Kilo and declared to the students that a proclamation had been passed just hours before. Once they knew, there was no way back. The students were told in the evening. In the morning the Derg had to declare the proclamation, and when that land declaration was made public, the biggest demonstration ever seen in the history of this country took place. The entire city was invaded, literally. Then, later on, in '93 or '94, he came back from London to fight about the land issue in the new constitution. It was a surprise for so many people, but he had his own paper to show how the previous land reform was right, and should continue. People were expecting a new economic model for this country, but I think Meles also accepted his position. They asked him to do research, as a consultant, and come back with an understanding of how the farmers felt on these issues. I had to accompany him. He was against any questionnaire which asked: 'Do you prefer "*If this land belongs to you*" or "*If this land remains in the hands of the government, and you use the service*"?' Zegeye said, 'That is a leading question. Instead of that, why don't you hold an open-ended discussion so that farmers can demonstrate whether the land does belong to them, whether they have a feeling of ownership, or whether they have other problems.' I think the findings were perfectly clear. I didn't come across a single farmer complaining about ownership. We interviewed so many of them. Zegeye asked, 'Some people say that you are not investing in your land because you fear the land will be taken.' And the response was, 'Who's going to come and take?' I remember a farmer saying, 'Do they have a big lorry, where they can cut off this land and transport it to somewhere? Or is it possible that I am here, and somebody would come and take my land away from now

on – that's impossible.' That paper was a turning point in terms of slowing down discussions on land issues.

I think the idea of land certification also came to the concern of this government largely because of Zegeye. Zegeye advocated this issue in many forums because his position was that he was very much concerned about gender, and he was very much concerned about the power of the smallholders over their own land. He says the implementation is not a full implementation in the spirit of the constitution. He was proposing that each and every householder, who possesses a piece of land, should be given a certificate of ownership over their land. And that certificate should at the same time demonstrate that the land is owned jointly by the husband and wife. If you ask a farmer, 'What evidence do you have that confirms that the land belongs to you?' He will give you the land use tax receipts, which he pays every year. So that is what the law considers. But Zegeye was saying, 'No, it must go beyond this. The land use tax receipt doesn't include the name of the wife.' So when there is a quarrel or divorce between a husband and wife, the man says, 'No, the land belongs to me. I have this. The government doesn't know you, because your name is not there.' That's what we see in rural areas.

Now in areas where that certificate has been given, the sense of ownership is even more enriched.

You know there are big institutions like IMF and the World Bank behind privatisation of land. Having people like Zegeye, and others who are dedicated about this issue is important. And of course, to come up with a different agenda is very difficult, particularly if you look at the Oromo and their attachment to their land. They saw it, they heard about it, what happened to this community when land was taken over in the older days. Probably this is the biggest unifying factor for farmers around land issues. So I would say that—at least in the foreseeable future—politicians coming with a different land agenda would not dominate the landscape of Ethiopian politics.

I think Hundee is regarded as 'an opposition party' in some

instances [laughs]. In 2005 I remember during the election, when the opposition had a large support, people were saying, 'No, we are ready to elect you, why don't you come as candidates?' Because for farmers, what an NGO or political party would mean—they don't make that differentiation you know. And, of course, Hundee, the entire branch managers, or staff, are well oriented about the land issue. Because the greatest part of Zegeye's talk is about this. If you like, it's a kind of indoctrination [laughs]. So everybody advocates about the land, wherever a meeting is held. I also see some highly educated elites who no longer live here, for different reasons, but have a firm stand on this, like Zegeye does.

But I do have reservations. I think what you can do in your individual capacity, and what you can do when you have to lead an organisation, should not be identical. When you lead an organisation, an organisation has its own mission, its own vision, and that must be attained, and whoever adversely contributes to attaining that vision and mission must be pushed away, and replaced by someone who supports the vision and mission. If you don't take proper action—it shouldn't be at the expense of the organisation. That soft-heartedness shouldn't be at the expense of the organisation.

Daniel: You can't rule out that he took action. He has been taking action. The difference is how he does it. He knows, he recognises the problem. But the way he deals with the problem is different. So I can't see him being the founder and executive director of an NGO without making decisions and without taking action. He has been making decisions, he has been taking action, but probably he takes it in a different way.

Alemayehu: I see a big energy inside him. If that part of his private life was somehow complete, Zegeye could probably have done much more than this. Yes, he knows very well that he is from an extended family, and he travels abroad, especially he travels for socialisation. What I mean is that he lost his wife and children at the time of his

imprisonment, before three decades. He always misses them. His daughter sometimes gives him a call. You cannot imagine, Zegeye for two weeks is a completely different person. For two weeks, just for having a call from his daughter. So if one of the boys also calls, the talk becomes about what they have discussed. Imagine what more he could have been. But all of a sudden, that's a kind of torture, missing his children. Not socialising with them. He loves kids. Whenever he sees kids, he tries to relate with them, because when he was in prison his three children were very young, especially the youngest was just a baby, so he wishes he had had that kind of relationship with them. Two are in The United States, and one is in France. When he goes abroad, he sees them.

Usually people of his kind, his background, his family, are somewhere in the United States or somewhere else enjoying their private life. They don't know about Ethiopia, let alone going down to the grassroots and so forth. That's a big sacrifice. But he is so popular because his life is completely connected to the poor and their land.

The strange thing is that Zegeye did not speak *Afaan Oromo* well when we met him in 1995. He learned *Afaan Oromo* in Hundee! All of us around him used to speak in *Afaan Oromo*, and when he started writing some of the words he didn't know, he was joking with us, saying, 'What does this mean?' Now he speaks perfectly. It's amazing. He never gives up learning. Some people do not know that he is Oromo. Even today, you hear people say, '... you know Zegeye is half Oromo, half Amhara,' or, 'You know ... his mother's side must be Amhara,' and so on. But he is a hundred per cent Oromo. His mother's side is a subset from this clan, his father's side is from that clan, and he was telling me his mother didn't speak Amharic.

His last memory of his father is his father's bible. He is keeping it in his home. Traditionally it is kept in a sort of wallet, but bigger, made from leather, that has two or three parts. One part is where you put the bible and you close it, again you close it, then you close it a third time. You make sure you keep it in a safe place. I see it with very old people, they keep it very safe ... and one day

he showed it to me. He said, 'This used to be my father's bible.' It's like, when you get closer to the church, the likelihood of learning Amharic, and being seen to be an Amhara, is possible. So it was very difficult for some people to know that he is entirely an Oromo.

Nemera: I think the most important thing is, he is more accommodative. Being one hundred per cent Oromo, he is also not alienating others.

Significant dates

- 1889 *Negus* Sahle Maryam, King of Shoa, becomes Emperor Menelik II of Ethiopia. He subjugates and incorporates the lands and peoples of the south, east and west into the Ethiopian Empire, including the Oromo, Sidama, Gurage, Wolayta and other peoples. Addis Ababa becomes Ethiopia's capital.
- 1895–96 Italy invades Ethiopia, and is defeated at the battle of Adua
- 1913 Menelik II dies. He designates his grandson, *Lij* Iyasu, as his successor.
- 1916 Iyasu is deposed, and is succeeded by Menelik's daughter. As Empress Zawditu she rules through a regent, *Ras* Tafari Makonnen
- 1930 Empress Zawditu dies, and *Ras* Tafari Makonnen becomes Emperor Haile Selassie I
- 1935 Italy invades Ethiopia
- 1936 Italy captures Addis Ababa and Emperor Haile Selassie goes into exile.
- 1941 British & Commonwealth troops, with the Ethiopian resistance, defeat the Italians. Emperor Haile Selassie returns to Ethiopia.
- 1952 The Federation of Ethiopia and Eritrea is created with support from a United Nations resolution.
- 1962 Haile Selassie annexes Eritrea as an Ethiopian province.
- 1973–74 An estimated 200,000 people die in a famine in Wollo province.

- 1974 Emperor Haile Selassie is overthrown in a military coup, led by the Derg. On 12 Sept Lieutenant General Aman Mikael Andom is appointed Head of State. He resigns on 17 November, and is killed a week later at his home in a battle with Derg troops. Colonel Mengistu Haile Mariam serves as interim Head of State until General Teferi Benti is appointed on 28 November.
- 1975 Haile Selassie is killed.
- 1977 Teferi Benti is killed and replaced by Mengistu Haile Mariam as Head of State.
- 1977-79 The 'Red Terror' period, during which thousands of government opponents are killed.
- 1977 Somalia invades Ethiopia's Ogaden Region
- 1978 Somali forces are defeated
- 1984-85 Thousands die in a famine which is exacerbated by conflict
- 1987 The Derg is formally abolished, and replaced by the People's Democratic Republic of Ethiopia. Mengistu is elected President under a new constitution.
- 1988 Somalia and Ethiopia sign a peace treaty
- 1991 Eritrea declares independence from Ethiopia.
- 1991 The EPRDF capture Addis Ababa, and Mengistu goes into exile in Zimbabwe. A Transitional Government is formed, with 'representatives of national liberation movements, other political organisations and prominent individuals'.
- 1992 In June, the OLF leaves the Transitional Government
- 1995 A constitution is adopted, ending the period of transition, and creating 'The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia'.

Ethiopia in 1974

Ethiopia and its surrounding countries as they were at the time of land reform. The hatched area shows roughly the position of modern Oromia, for comparison. For the location of Amhara and other broad ethnic areas, please see the map overleaf of Ethiopia in 2013.



Ethiopia in 2012

Ethiopia and its surrounding countries at the time of the interview. Ethiopia is now constituted as a federation of nine ethnically-based regional states and two chartered cities (Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa).



Glossary & Acronyms

<i>Abaye</i>	Traditional, affectionate term of address for a woman of senior age or status
<i>Afaan Oromo</i>	The Oromo Language
<i>Ato</i>	Equivalent of Mr.
ANC	The <i>African National Congress</i> of South Africa
CIDA	The <i>Canadian International Development Agency</i>
CSO	<i>Civil Society Organisation</i>
CUD	The <i>Coalition for Unity and Democracy</i> , a coalition of four existing political parties which competed for seats in the Ethiopian General Elections of 2005.
Derg	Committee or Council. The short name of the <i>Coordinating Committee of the Armed Forces, Police, and Territorial Army</i> which ruled Ethiopia from 1974 to 1987, though the name is used informally to cover the whole of the Mengistu period to 1991. It was formally renamed the <i>Provisional Military Administrative Council</i> soon after it was established.
ECA	The United Nations' <i>Economic Commission for Africa</i> , headquartered in Addis Ababa.
ECHAT	Amharic acronym for the <i>Ethiopian Oppressed People's Revolutionary Struggle</i> . ECHAT was active between 1975 and 1978, emerging from a split away from MEISON.
EDU	The <i>Ethiopian Democratic Union</i> , a political party formed in opposition to the Derg regime. It merged with the <i>Ethiopian Democratic Party</i> to form the <i>Ethiopian Democratic Unity Party</i> .

- ELF** The *Eritrean Liberation Front*, formed in 1960 to seek Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia. The *EPLF (Eritrean People's Liberation Front)* split from it in 1970.
- EPRDF** The *Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front* is a coalition including the *Oromo Peoples' Democratic Organisation (OPDO)*, the *Amhara National Democratic Movement (ANDM)*, the *Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Movement (SEPDM)* and the *Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF)*.
- EPRP** The *Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Party* was established in April 1972 in opposition to the monarchy and the feudal system. It was initially supportive of the revolution which toppled Emperor Haile Selassie I, but was later in conflict with the Derg.
- FDRE** The *Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia*, established in 1995.
- Fit'awrari** A military title: the commander of the vanguard of a traditional Ethiopian armed force.
- Galla** Insulting, perjorative term used by others to describe Oromo people
- Gashie** Form of address for an elder brother, or someone regarded as taking the role of an elder brother
- GDR** The *German Democratic Republic*
- Hundee** An Ethiopian NGO whose name means '*The root (of the tree)*'. It is also the nickname given to Ahmad Taqi Sheikh Mohammed Rashid, an early Oromo nationalist.
- IMF** The *International Monetary Fund*
- Injera** A sourdough-risen flatbread with a unique, slightly spongy texture.
- Kebele** Neighbourhood (the smallest local administrative area)
- Lycée** *Lycée Guebre-Mariam* is the French international school in Addis Ababa.

<i>Lij</i>	Ge'ez for 'child'. A title issued at birth to sons of the hereditary nobility.
MBA	<i>Masters in Business Administration</i>
MEISON	The <i>All-Ethiopia Socialist Movement</i> . Like the EPRP, MEISON was supportive of the revolution, but unlike them remained aligned with the Derg government when the EPRP began to oppose it.
NDI	The <i>National Democratic Institute</i> , a Washington-based NGO.
NGO	<i>Non-Government Organisation</i>
OLF	The <i>Oromo Liberation Front</i> . Established in 1973 to promote self-determination for the Oromo people.
ONLF	The <i>Ogaden National Liberation Front</i> .
PMAC	<i>Provisional Military Administrative Council</i> . See Derg.
Quintal	A standard measurement of mass for agricultural produce. In Ethiopia it is defined as 100kg.
SNV	A Dutch NGO, originally the <i>Foundation of Netherlands Volunteers</i> .
TGE	The <i>Transitional Government of Ethiopia</i> , formed in 1991 and continued until 1995 when it transitioned into the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia.
TPLF	The <i>Tigrayan People's Liberation Front</i> , formed in 1975 from the earlier <i>Tigrayan National Organisation</i> (1974).
UN	The <i>United Nations</i>
USA	The <i>United States of America</i>
USAID	The <i>United States Agency for International Development</i>
WHO	The <i>World Health Organisation</i>
Woreda	District
Yeneta	The teacher in a scripture school of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church

About the interviewer

Ann Oosthuizen was born in South Africa. In the late 1960s and early 1970s she lectured at Rhodes University, where she wrote and toured with two plays written in protest at apartheid. In 1972 she moved to New York, and then to London, where she was a founder member of Sheba Feminist Publishers. Her own titles include *Loneliness and Other Lovers*; *Sometimes When it Rains* [editor—a collection of stories by South African women writers]; and *Sarah's Story*. Her poems and short stories have appeared in various collections, including *Licking the Bed Clean*; *Hard Feelings*; *Smile Smile Smile Smile*; *One Foot on the Mountain*; and *Mirror, Mirror*. In 1990, she returned to South Africa for ten years, where she wrote radio plays as teaching aids for teachers of English, and edited educational material for the English Language Teaching Information Centre, and for Macmillan publishers. She currently lives in Wales, where she recently published a long interview with Osi Rhys Osmond, the Welsh artist, in *Encounters with Osi Rhys Osmond*.

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